Thomas, Sarah Elizabeth Annie (2019) Making worlds with raven in rural Iceland: entangled memoir for the Anthropocene. PhD thesis.

https://theses.gla.ac.uk/75133/

Copyright and moral rights for this work are retained by the author

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

This work cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

Enlighten: Theses
https://theses.gla.ac.uk/
research-enlighten@glasgow.ac.uk

Making Worlds with Raven in Rural Iceland: Entangled Memoir for the Anthropocene

Sarah Elizabeth Annie Thomas
MA

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Research)

School of Interdisciplinary Studies
College of Social Sciences
University of Glasgow

May 2019

Abstract

The Anthropocene epoch calls for new narratives which accurately relate the experiences of our times from a diversity of perspectives. As humans make an irreversible impact on the geological record, I suggest that such narratives should engender more democratic and generative sharing of earth with other life forms – on the page as in life. Drawing upon my own transformative experiences of reciprocal living with human and non-human Others in the remote Westfjords of Iceland, I present a memoir, *The Raven's Nest,* as my experiment towards such de-centred and 'entangled' writing (Haraway 2016). Covering the period of 2008 – 2014 it includes a variety of instabilities characteristic of the Anthropocene – economic, social, geological, and ecological – in the context of the everyday concerns of a sheep farming and fishing community at sixty-six degrees North.

I argue that Anthropocenic narratives should resist a linear trajectory of beginning – middle – end, which is often wrongly conflated with the shape of 'progress', and instead find a new shape which can contain the 'ongoingness' of life, broken as it is. Drawing on Donna Haraway's concept of 'entanglements' (2016), and applying Ursula Le Guin's 'Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' (1989) to memoir, pulled together by Ingold's ideas about 'weaving' as a way of being in the world (2000), I propose a woven, many threaded, container-shape composed of plant, animal and man-made materials: a 'raven's nest'.

I highlight that the North as an idea – which includes Iceland – has been shaped by masculinist cultural representations which are a legacy of the era of polar exploration and remain dominant. This representation of North as an empty space; a wilderness; an extreme to be conquered or pentrated is in need of revision in our times. In search of an 'ancestry' that reflects my own experience of being a woman dwelling in the North and dependent on others for my survival, I find a number of women. From them, I focus on a canon of writers and a film-maker, identifying the tropes they share with my memoir and with each other which might be usefully incorporated into Anthropocenic narratives.

Finally, I discuss the ethical implications of entanglement as it manifests in living, and in writing a memoir in the context of the academy. Acknowledging human 'entanglements' with other-than-human agents involves acknowledging the impact writing about them might have. This is true for places as much as for people. This thesis explores what happens when place speaks through human stories.

Contents

Abstract 2

Acknowledgements 5

Author's Declaration 7

Preface 8

Memoir: *The Raven's Nest*

- Breaking Up 11
- Landing 14
- Shift 20
- *Tónleikar* – Concert 27
- *Fjallafang* – Embrace of the Mountain 31
- *Mataræði* – Diet 39
- *Gíslholt* 47
- Seal Wife 54
- *Smala og Slátur* – The Gathering and The Slaughter 60
- *Gos* – eruption/ gas / fizzy drink 66
- *Flýtja* – Move 74
- *Krummi* – Raven (familiar) 79
- *Bogguhús* 84
- The Frozen Bell 87
- The Possibilities are Endless 97
- *Trúlofuð* – Engagement 100
- *Selur* – Seal 113
- *Þakkið* – Roof 123
- A Walk in my Valley 130
- *Göng* – Passage, corridor, tunnel 138
- *Snúið* – The Turn 145
- *Innflytjandi* – 'in-carrier'/ Immigrant 147
- The Strangest Silence 158

– *Svartfuglsegg* – ‘black-birds-egg’ 164
– *Hvalurinn* – The Whale 170
– *Seljavallalaug* – ‘shieling-field-pool’ 175
– Herring Adventure 179
– To Hell and Back 184
– The Raven’s Nest 196
– *Í burtu* – In the distance 205

Weaving Worlds with Raven - 1 -

Writing the Nature of North - 40 -

The Ethics of Entanglement - 68 -

Bibliography - 87-

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to more people and places than I can mention. First and foremost, my heartfelt thanks to Iceland and its inhabitants – human and other-than-human – for their elemental truths, and for inspiring evolving ways to be in and with the world. And to the Icelandic language for giving me new tools to think with, and for helping me to understand what richness there is in silence.

To author Robert Macfarlane and Penguin Books UK, my deep appreciation for their inspired initiative – *A Journey on Foot* – to which I can attribute my transformation from quiet blogger to published writer as their Summer Wayfarer. Many thanks to Sharon Blackie and David Knowles at the now defunct *Earthlines Magazine* for their consistent championing and for recognising I had a book in me. My thanks also go to *The Dark Mountain Project* for providing a suitable home and broader context for my writing alongside this thesis and for including me in their editorial team, which has underlined what necessary and urgent work such writing can be. Deepest gratitude to author Janni Howker for her empathy and insistence that the craft of writing deserved my commitment. Her class, *The Writer's Tool Box* at the Brewery Arts Centre Kendal, drew out of me the seeds which would become this story.

I would like to acknowledge the influence of reading my memoir-in-progress aloud at two spoken word events in particular – Stealing Thunder in Cumbria and Spotlight in Lancaster. The process of both listening to and performing various kinds of storytelling, allowed me to keep in mind the prosody and affect of language as I committed it to the page.

For their emotional support and encouragement through good times and bad, particular thanks go to my parents Jean and Barrie Thomas and co-dweller Jonny Randall, and friends Sam Albert, A. Dee, Maia Galarraga, Ally Heley, Laura Johnson, Beryl Lund, Annabelle Macfadyen, Ben Macfadyen, Aitan Mizrahi, Lucy Smethurst, and Eva Tregidgo, and to John Nicoll for his incredible generosity with a place to write. Abi Andrews, Nancy Campbell, Claire Dean, Tim Dee, Charlotte DuCann, Jay Griffiths, Nick Hunt, Sarah Hymas, Ellen Jeffrey, Natalie Marr, Autumn Richardson and Richard Skelton have all offered stimulating ideas and/or insight on the writer's life and I am grateful for all of it. Thanks also to poet Em Strang for inadvertently arranging the situation in which I met my primary supervisor.

Þúsund þakkir to Pétur Einarsson, Omar Smári Kristinsson, Emily Lethbridge, Anna Sigríður Ólafsdóttir and Úlfur Þór Úlfarsson for their support, sound-boarding, fact-checking and hospitality on my comings and goings to Iceland, and to Heimir Hanson at the Westfjords Tourist Information Office, to Dick Phillips and his amazing library of literature on Iceland in English at Fljótsdalur, to Aðalsteinn Hákonarson at the Department of Name Studies – Place-Name Archive at The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, Reykjavík and to Þorsteinn Sigurðsson at the Marine and Freshwater Research Institute, Reykjavík for providing place-related data and statistics. Thanks also to Erland Clouston for his generous access to Nan Shepherd's photographs and ephemera and to Sarah Neely and Peter Todd for their generous assistance in teaching me about Margaret Tait.

Profound thanks to Eleni Kariki for her perceptive feedback on early drafts, to Olga Bloemen for her heartfelt and diligent reading of my memoir manuscript, and to John Albert for his astute and compassionate editorial advice for the critical discussion. My greatest thanks surely go to my supervisors Dr. David Borthwick and Professor Alison Phipps, who have guided me with sensitivity and boldness to produce a piece of work that has navigated a changing self, and to the College of Social Sciences for the scholarship that made this research possible.

Finally, I would like to thank my ex-husband and his family for showing me new ways to look at life – lessons which are still reverberating years later.

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

Statement of Originality to Accompany Thesis Submission

Registration Number:

I certify that the thesis presented here for examination for a PhD degree of the University of Glasgow is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it) and that the thesis has not been edited by a third party beyond what is permitted by the University's PGR Code of Practice.

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it is permitted without full acknowledgement.

I declare that the thesis does not include work forming part of a thesis presented successfully for another degree [unless explicitly identified and as noted below].

I declare that this thesis has been produced in accordance with the University of Glasgow's Code of Good Practice in Research.

I acknowledge that if any issues are raised regarding good research practice based on review of the thesis, the examination may be postponed pending the outcome of any investigation of the issues.

Name: Sarah Thomas

Signature:

Date: 08.05.19

Preface

The Raven's Nest, the memoir included in this thesis, is set in the context of the Anthropocene. Such an epoch presents a myriad of challenges, the nature of which no species has faced before, and to which a writer must adapt her words to be of service to an unfolding future, which is unknown and unknowable. The chapter which follows, 'Weaving Worlds with Raven', seeks to give theoretical foundation to the concept of the raven's nest as an overarching metaphor for the memoir: as a container for the materials from which the memoir is made, and as a shape into which a narrative of the Anthropocene might usefully be woven.

In the memoir chapter 'The Raven's Nest', the narrator sees a true raven's nest, enclosed within a glass case at an Icelandic natural history museum. Preserved in this way, the nest crucially cannot go on bearing life. With this memoir, I have attempted instead to build a nest with a weave strong enough to remain vital out in the Anthropocene, rather than stuck inside a glass case of unfruitful ideologies. This is my offering to such times.

I have never had the good fortune to observe a raven building a nest. However, over the course of my research I have taken steps to imaginatively inhabit other-than-human perspectives, especially Raven, which have helped me construct my memoir.[1] I attended workshops with writers who attempt to write from the imagined perspectives of other species. These include 'What are the stories of the birds?' with Dr. Claire Dean and 'Do you speak Seagull?' with poet Susan Richardson.[2] I also attended the Artangel exhibition 'Natural Selection' in which artist Andy Holden and his ornithologist father Peter Holden consider birds as artists, asking whether their nests and their eggs could be viewed as expressive creations rather than simply an evolutionary necessity.[3] I have read about nest building in scientific texts. In a nod to this process, the subheadings in 'Weaving Worlds with Raven' are taken from *Animal Architecture* by Mike Hansell (2005) and reflect the

---

[1] In response to the dualism and anthropocentrism implied by the commonly-used term 'non-human' to describe Others which are not human – i.e. its suggestion that there are two categories of life: 'humans' and 'everything else' – in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (1996) author David Abram suggested the alternative term 'more-than-human'. However, rather than treating life forms as of equal value this term still suggests a hierarchy of beings, albeit one within which humans have been demoted. To acknowledge the democratic approaches to living and dying in the Anthropocene discussed in this thesis, I use the term 'other-than-human'.

[2] Workshops include 'What are the stories of the birds?' with Dr. Claire Dean at Friends Meeting House, Lancaster, UK in June 2016 and 'Do you speak Seagull?' with poet Susan Richardson at O.N.C.A (One Network for Conservation and The Arts) Brighton, UK in December 2016.

[3] See: https://www.artangel.org.uk/project/natural-selection/ [accessed 3 March 2019]

concerns and considerations of real-world nest building. With a creative practice open to play, as ravens are wont to do, I have also experimented with my own nest designs through drawing and model making, included here as ‘fragments’. Gathered here, too, are raven-themed and Anthropocenic scraps and images, threaded throughout as nest-building ephemera.

The subsequent chapter, ‘Writing the Nature of North’ seeks to redefine an ideological North that remains characterized by a masculinist gaze, resulting from biases towards heroic and scientific narratives on both sides of the Atlantic, emerging from the era of polar exploration. My redefinition focuses instead on the North as a centre of sensuous experience and on the body as a source of knowledges. I identify a canon of writers and a film-maker who I feel exemplify this redefinition, and whose work resonates with my own experience of North. I suggest that such works might be characterised as rewilded feminine writing and film-making.

In the final chapter ‘The Ethics of Entanglement’ I address the moral and institutional ethics I have faced writing a memoir which includes a divorce, as an entangled narrator and author, in the context of a PhD in the College of Social Sciences. I reflect on my responsibilities to people and places with whom I have ongoing relationships, and with whom those relationships are strained or have ended, and on my responsibilities to myself as both narrator and author. I demonstrate the measures I have taken to mitigate damage to emotions and places, and to protect people’s privacy.

My *Raven’s Nest* – my memoir – is built to be a resilient dwelling place. It is woven from man-made and organic word-fragments, intended to contain the story of a couple through two cycles of light and dark. These ‘building materials’ existed before the couple sheltered there and might be used after they have left. Even as the nest – the narrative – breaks apart, the intention is that it can be re-made, and its parts reused. The memoir is intended to remain adaptable to the addition of new chapters, to the removal of existing chapters. Adaptable as it is intended to be, one need not read all of it in order to trace the threads of my experiment or to feel the shape of their weave.

The invitation is to read the thesis in whichever order one chooses. One might begin with *The Raven’s Nest*, the chapters of which can be read consecutively, or at random – each being somewhat self-contained. Or one might begin by ‘Weaving Worlds with Raven’. In order to physically embody the thesis’ cyclical structure and the fact that neither memoir nor critical discussion should assume more importance than the other, in the hard copy of

this thesis the sections are bound inverted, such that there are two ‘front’ covers. When one part is complete, the reader may simply flip it over and begin from the other side.

As we shall see, with such a project there is no clear distinction between inner and outer; there is no beginning and no end. The text in this thesis is not copper-bottomed but feather-lined.

~ a memoir ~

<u>Breaking up</u>

August 2014

I am sitting in the kitchen of my old, corrugated iron-clad house. Underneath me, 800 kilometres southeast, the earth has been breaking up since the evening I parked up out front, one long week ago. I arrived as the day dimmed, relieved to have the hours of rock and sea and fog behind me – months of anticipation giving way to reality. Then, 10 kilometres deep, below a distant glacier, unseen but detected by a myriad of instruments and geologists, a tremor swarm began. I heard it on the radio the next morning as the late summer sun poured in through the large windows. There had been 250 earthquakes during the night.

When the news broke, I laughed at the consistency with which my comings and goings between England and Iceland seemed to precisely coincide with weather changes and volcanic activity. Eyjafjallajökull – the Icelandic volcano that nobody could pronounce, and that closed European airspace in 2010 – was preceded by a lesser known smaller eruption on Fimmvörðuháls. That began the day I arrived in March 2010 and ended the day I left, with the eruption of the unpronounceable one. I had been on one of the last flights for many days, separated from my husband by a cloud of ash.

Now, each day, more earthquakes, and the crack has grown from nothing to 50 kilometres long in a week – still invisible as it rips apart below Vatnajökull, the largest glacier in the country. Every day, every hour from 7am til 11pm the radio news announces the latest earthquakes, usually in the region of 1000 per day now, the strongest recently reaching 5.7 on the Richter scale. I hang onto every word, not knowing if I should prepare myself to leave before I risk getting stuck here.

The first few days of this trip were difficult. My destination – clarity in an uncertain marriage – is far from guaranteed. I have mostly been here alone. Well, with my cat. And a brief but intense lifetime of memories to process – some dark, some joyful. This house and I felt asynchronous when I walked in. It looked much the same as it did when I left all those months ago. I had even asked my husband, Bjarni, for the cat to be there. He made sure he was at the house when I arrived and was cooking lamb in the kitchen like nothing had ever happened. The only evidence of time passing was a few kind notes from tourists who had come and enjoyed this 'thing' we had created, while we did not live in it ourselves – this

‘bohemian Arctic hideaway’, this ‘romantic retreat’; while we had tried to figure out how and where we could live together, and failed.

I feel the need to do something physical, and aesthetic, to mark the change. In front of me, I peel decades of wallpaper, hessian, and old newspaper from the walls in my study, to get back to the bare bones of this place – this wooden kit-house from Norway, erected in 1902. We know exactly who erected it, and we know that his son’s wife lived in it for 70 years before we became the current owners. It may be that couple’s history I am peeling away now, to reveal the time-darkened honey-coloured pine panelling it was made with, before it became fashionable to mask it with paper. A well-travelled wood, for there were no trees here big enough to build with. The final layer is *The Weekly Scotsman June 19th 1909*. How did that newspaper end up in this house on the Arctic Circle, and so much of it too?

Old news, which one day mine shall also be. Trees, wood, paper, words – they vanish as they form.

Old news, which one day this imminent eruption shall be, whether it happens or not. For now I try to embrace the Icelandic way, and take each day as it comes. To stay put and do what I came here to do.

The international news recalls the ‘chaos’ caused by the 2010 volcano that nobody could pronounce. Here Júliana, my old boss from the flower shop, dismisses this one as a ‘media sensation’. I enjoy her humanising of this seismic activity; the suggestion that somehow it is a protracted form of attention-grabbing, like a celebrity affair. My neighbour Mæja tells me, ‘There’s nothing you can do but wait and see. It’s the same as driving a car in a big city. Sure something might happen but that doesn’t stop you from driving.’

Bjarni and I find each other much easier to get along with than we expected. The connection is heartfelt and strong, but we still know we must go our separate ways in order to become ourselves again. It is like living inside a dream sequence: the backdrop is the same, he is there, he is calm and almost happy. The cat is curled up on the chair. It’s like it used to be, but it’s not. Neither of us can live in this house, for now. He cannot bear the reminders of our broken union hanging on every picture hook and in every colour we painted the walls. I cannot bear the long months of darkness and the separation from the rest of the world – a crucible for unreconciled pains. I have returned to live in my own country, where at least I know that the sun will rise above the horizon every day. I have not stood in this house to be

prodded by these hooks and these colours, until now. I have traversed rivers of grief to arrive here, and now we must make new memories.

I still love him and yet I cannot smell him anymore. I try, but I find nothing. It disturbs me. It is one of the foundations on which I committed to this unlikely path. Has sorrow and distance altered our chemistry?

‘Can *you* smell *me*?’ I ask him.

‘You smell like a distressed mink,’ he says, without irony or insult. For him, it is simply a fact. Like an eruption will be a fact. And a divorce. There is nothing I can do but accept our fate.

* * *

I accept it and we go together to initiate proceedings. On that day, of all days, there is a region-wide phone and internet drop-out. There is nothing we can do. I leave tomorrow. I shall leave still married.

As I spend my final hours in Reykjavík, the news breaks that the crack has become visible, and the glacier is collapsing. I make my flight back to Edinburgh.

As I trundle my bulky luggage – much of it chattels from my Icelandic study – along North Bridge in the city dark of 1am, across the tracks of Edinburgh Waverley station, my eye is caught by the gold up-lit stone lettering emblazoned across the façade of an imposing turn of the century building. *The Scotsman.* I slow to a halt as I realise it is in *this* building that those words were created, that old news that I had been peeling off my walls, before they made their way across the sea to my house, and my study.

The next day I receive an email from Bjarni:

The volcano erupted at two minutes past midnight the night you left.

Landing

May 2008

My neck aches as I react to the '*bong*' prompting passengers to fasten their seat belts. My face has been pressed against the oval window for thirty minutes straight, turning only briefly to say, 'tea please'. Beyond the condensation of my breath and the delicate ice crystals forming on the outside of the window, I have been looking out at a translucent blue sky that is stretched thin by the weight of a profuse and nearby sunlight. Beneath it the sea is a choppy teal blue as if painted in by a stippled brush and the shoreline meets the mountains frankly. Their opaque indigo bulk rises sharply and is flat on top as if a giant has taken a sword to them. It is an Arctic palette, an infinite blue, and the landscape appears as wild and unsullied as the earth does from space. Though lodged in my heart is the knowledge that pristinity is an illusion in our times, for the moment I am enrapt. I am heading the furthest north I have ever been: sixty-six degrees latitude. Even in late May, snow swirls on the mountain tops and rests in shaded hollows. Since lifting off from Reykjavík I have not noticed any other cities or even arial towns; only settlements I would describe generously as villages. Of them I cannot recall more than three.

I am on my way to the small town of Ísafjörður – the 'capital' of the Westfjords – in the top northwest corner of Iceland, which for reasons none of the delegates will understand or care about, is the unlikely and awe-inspiring location for a conference of visual anthropologists. I will be presenting a documentary I made on the Equator, here in the Arctic. The view from the window could not be more different to the world of my film: the cracked earth, coloured beads and giant euphorbia trees of Kenya's Samburuland that will soon be projecting on a screen down there somewhere.

I have been invited to stay with some friends of a friend, and as I gaze out at the wilderness I feel fortunate to have connections this remotely. I wrote a while back thanking them for their kind offer of a bed, and in response received 'directions': a photograph taken from the side of a mountain, looking down onto a long narrow fjord flanked on the opposite side by another steep sided mountain – a trough of rock filled with sea. A spit curled out from the foreground, to part way across the mouth of the fjord, forming a sheltered harbour. Brightly coloured houses were clustered on the spit and the few other flat surfaces of land. Their spread was contained by the clutch of the landscape – as if gravity itself pulled the houses towards the sea. Where construction ended, wild nature abruptly began – loose boulders on

tussocky heaths and funnels of scree sloping up to terraced cliffs of basalt. This was altogether different from the patchwork of green squares and vast masses of concrete that is England from above. Over on the far shore at the bottom of the fjord was a yellow circle, and the word 'Airport'. Towards the foot of the spit was another yellow circle: 'Salvar and Natalía'. Their house was oxide red – I could see that from the photograph. My rational city brain was slightly wary at the lack of further information, but my intuitive self could see that this was the only information I would need. I liked these people: visual and concise.

As the twin propeller Air Iceland plane suddenly banks sharply left, I recognise that this is *that* fjord, that spit seen from the other side. I realise I might even be able to spot the house I am going to. My search for it is quickly replaced by my alarm at the proximity of the wing tip to the mountain. If this had been the moment when my hosts had taken that photograph, it would be a very close shave indeed. I briefly look around at the other twenty passengers on this packed flight and cannot fathom how some of them are *reading a newspaper.* This moment is both frightening and phenomenally beautiful. We descend to the bottom of the fjord and bank steeply again. Somebody has mown a large HÆ into their hay meadow – a greeting. We land and bounce onto the airstrip facing towards the mouth of the fjord, from which we have just come. 'How is that even possible?' I think to myself. I would later learn that Ísafjörður is one of the most extreme airports in the world in which to land.

We enter the miniature single storey terminal and in the same room passengers are waiting to board the same plane back to Reykjavík. We mingle. There are two flights a day: Ísafjörður – Reykjavík – Ísafjörður – Reykjavík. Passengers departing Ísafjörður don't need an app to tell them if the flight is running on time. They just look up in the sky when they hear the engine rumbling and hop in their cars to curl around the bay to the airport, playing plane chase. I would later learn that the radar tower operator is also a carpenter in town, and simply cycles over to the airport when a flight is due, then returns to work when he has seen the plane safely off again.

It turns out that several fellow delegates are on the same flight and there is a coach waiting for us outside. White-bodied birds I have not seen before wheel, combative like throwing stars, above the car park showering the air with cries of *keeea keeea.* Humans wrestle their black luggage into large black four-wheel drives. The mountains tower above us and insist that we are small here. You can spot those who do not live here. Their mouths hang agape over the necks of their Goretex jackets, and their luggage has lost all relevance. The locals are not dressed as if about to go on a hike. Outwardly they appear to have developed an

immunity to the landscape's power, but I imagine it is more complicated than that.

We board the coach and a tall frowning man with a grey side parting and a shiny face fusses and breaks intermittently into nervous laughter. '*Hæ*. I'm Valdimar,' he greets repeatedly. He is clearly in charge, but it looks like this is the most organising he has had to do in a while. It is hot, and I have come only with jumpers. The sun is near and bright and beats on me through the large glass window, as if curious and eager to illuminate everything it can. I drink in the scene through squinted eyes and feel both sleepy and enormously awakened.

All aboard we round the bottom of the fjord, passing on our left a building with a tall chimney, a grid-like housing development and a supermarket with conspicuously gaudy signage of yellow with a bright pink pig: BÓNUS it is called. Behind it all is a long lush valley lined with lupine and speckled with brightly coloured wooden cabins. Midway up the valley I can make out a large waterfall that in another place would be reason enough to come here, and a square patch of pine trees that in another place would not stand a chance of being referred to as a forest. There is a long, man-made sharp-edged ridge separating that valley from the buildings along the fjord's edge and we are told it is an avalanche guard. In the harbour lagoon to our right, flocks of eider ducks bob amongst reflected impressions of the sun-glowed mountains – morphing orange and green fragments floating leaf-like in the black glassy water. Onwards we pass a scattering of houses, then the town proper seems to begin. Valdimar takes the microphone and points out in quick succession a kindergarten, a school, an old people's home, a hospital and across the road, a church and cemetery.

'I suppose they have to be ergonomic with town planning here!' An Italian academic in the seat behind me chuckles. 'Look, a whole life in 500 metres!'

As we approach the spit on which the oldest part of the town is built, I see that the houses are all clad in brightly coloured corrugated iron, with differently coloured iron roofs. In just one street I see cornflower blue, deep red, egg yolk yellow, black. It gives the town an air of playfulness – I imagine the people here to be happy and daring. The coach slows to a halt by the church and I take my photo directions to Valdimar. It is a map made for a bird or a hiker at height. I am at the wrong angle here.

'Do you know where this house is?' I ask him. 'That's where I'm staying.'

'Whose house is it? Salvar and Natalía? Ah yes, I know them.'

He reaches for his mobile phone and scrolls for their number. He doesn't have it. He inspects the photograph a little more closely. '...Sólgata, Hrannagata, Mánagata, Hafnarstræti...Ah that is this one!' He points at the street we are on. That was easy.

Twenty metres later I am standing in front of an oxide red house, conjoined with a leaf green house muralled with giant dandelions. From what I have seen of Icelandic homes from the outside, it seems to be typical to make displays of ornaments in the windows, as if to delight those walking past on the street, and to give an inkling of the people who live inside. In the moments between my knocking and the door being answered, while I imagine what Salvar and Natalía might be like, I notice on their window sill a tall glass jar filled with strangely shaped birds' eggs I have never seen before, each a different shade of aquamarine, green, duck egg blue, turquoise, ivory: an exquisite non-tessellation of otherness. For reasons I cannot explain, they touch me deeply. Can one be reminded of something by a form entirely new?

Salvar and Natalía have warned me by email that, though they are happy to put me up, they are extremely busy preparing to leave for the highlands, for their summer job running a 'mountain shop'. This tidbit of information has made me curious about their lives. The idea of a seasonal existence makes so much sense to me. I am prone to get into deep conversation when something interests me but in the circumstances I'm willing to drop my bags and make myself scarce as quickly as possible. I am greeted at the first knock by two smiles and a welcome large enough to fill the reception room that seems to be dedicated entirely to this purpose, and to the storage of a sizeable rail of coats, hats and scarves. After putting down my bags and exchanging greetings the blue eggs are one of the first things I ask about.

'Ah! *Svartfuglsegg*,' says Salvar. 'Yes. They are *very* beautiful.'

He gives me one to hold. It has been drained and has a hole at either end.

'*Svart-fugl* means 'black-bird' but it's the word for the sea birds that are black. There are several kinds. This one is *langvía.* Guillemot, I think you call it.'

I turn it in my finger tips and hold it up to the light. It is at once strong and fragile, pointed and round, simple and infinitely complex – a collection of paradoxes in ovoid. A thick strong shell the colour of turquoise, a perfectly rounded base that sits so naturally in the palm of

my hand. Sides that rise gracefully like the steepest of volcanoes into a sharply rounded point. An archipelago of burnt umber marks speckled over an ocean of delicate blue. It is as though it has been clutched excitedly by a tiny fingered beast, covered in paint. Holding the egg in that moment, I feel within me a tectonic shift so deep that only the most perceptive would notice.

'*Kaffi*?' Natalía offers.

It will be the first of many cups drunk around the large table in their triple-glazed conservatory; their *Vetrarhöllin* ('Winter Palace') as they proudly call it. Today, there is enough time only to make a quick life-sketch of each other. They tell me they are artists. Natalía is from Moscow and Salvar is an Icelandic farmer's son. They met at art school in Germany. They had noticed each other and shy Salvar asked Natalía out for a cup of tea. 'It is the longest cup of tea in history. We are still having it!' Natalía giggles. They came to the Westfjords to live alone on Æðey, a small island near here, in response to a job advertisement to read the weather instruments, which served the region. They knew they would be inspired by the solitude and the nature and have time to develop their artistic practice.

After eight winters of living that life, alternating with their summer job in the highlands, they decided to be part of a community on the mainland and chose Ísafjörður, this regional capital of 2000 people. From the island, Salvar came 'shopping' one day to find a house. 'Get something cheap that we can make nice,' was Natalía's only instruction. He found this modest red house on the spit across the fjord, the sea at either end of the street. They got such a good deal, they believe, because the locals were so grateful for the 'hardships' they had endured living alone on an island. Salvar chuckles. 'Oh the 'suffering'! We *loved* it!'. After months of renovating, the neighbour put the adjacent house up for sale, which they also bought. 'Probably sick of our banging!' Salvar laughs guiltily.

'This house is our life plan – as long as the sea levels don't get us first,' Salvar says with a healthy dose of realism. 'So, there is plenty of time to renovate slowly. We are not rich, but we are happy.'

'We won't do anything with the green house for ages. But one day it will be our studios.' Natalía's voice is like a song. 'That's why we've painted *huge* dandelions on it, so at least it looks beautiful. First flowers of summer. Look!'

There is a hummock in their back garden, overflowing with dandelions in the long grass. ‘That is an elf hill,’ said Salvar. ‘Isn’t it beautiful?!’

Between June and September each year, Salvar and Natalía go to the highlands to run a shop housed in a vintage American school bus. That is why they are particularly busy now, packing and ordering supplies before going south in two weeks’ time. That is as far as we get for now.

I show them the programme of films for the conference – documentaries from all around the world. ‘*Ayi*! Why do they never *advertise* these things? It is so frustrating! It’s not often we have something so interesting happening in our town.’ They promise to come to my film and will try to find time to see some others. We drink coffee and chat for at least half an hour before I realise it is time to go and register at the conference, and Salvar and Natalía remind themselves that they are busy preparing for the summer.

I sense immediately that we delegates are interlopers in this place, this life; that visitors’ affairs are very separate to local ones. The visitors arrive, mostly once winter is over, with the star-shaped birds. They are equipped with their global perspectives and their brightly coloured waterproofs, feeling, as I do, that they have made it to the edge of the world. But for the people here, this is not an edge. This is their centre. If you were to stand on the pebble beach at the end of Salvar and Natalía’s street, looking out across the mouth of the fjord to the mountains and glacier beyond, you too would feel that the rest of the world was somewhere very far away, and of seemingly little relevance but undoubtedly having an impact on this fragile island. I feel privileged, through staying with Salvar and Natalía, that I may get to stand at the shore’s edge and listen to the tide a while; to stand where the subtler levels of Here and Elsewhere mingle, not visit Iceland through a window.

Shift

Natalía and Salvar were an interesting pair. Over the course of a few days, as the sun set around midnight, our late-night conversations took me deeper into this world and their place in it. Their version of 'busy' was quite different from mine. There was always time for ambling conversation. For them, life was an evolution: a matter of cause and effect with a healthy dose of philosophy grounded in experience, blended simultaneously with an acceptance that you never know what is going to happen. They were clearly quite self-sufficient but welcomed new ideas. The way they talked about life, made me feel there was something about this place that nurtured experiment. Ideas tested out were approached playfully: something might not work but it wouldn't be deemed a failure. It sat differently in me than the well-planned output-driven culture that I was a part of, which was reluctant to admit when something was not working, let alone change it. This approach to life landed in my stomach, not in my head, and it fluttered.

Their former role on Æðey – 'the island of eiders' – an otherwise uninhabited island 25-kilometres off the coast, had required living on a small farm. They took weather readings twice a day and fed the animals. Once a week provisions would be brought by the post boat, and that was most often the only human contact they had. Theirs was an important role – the local community's safety depended on it: everyone's lives were ruled by the weather here, not least the fishermen on whose catch the economy largely depended. Yet finding anyone who wanted to live alone on an island had become increasingly difficult. The last man to do the job had been driven mad by the isolation: he had turned to alcohol.

The island had been Natalía's first experience of living in Iceland full-time. Apparently, it was not uncommon for foreigners, even Icelanders, to come to Iceland only in summer to do 'summer jobs'. Staying for the full year was a different act requiring a particular mentality, and it was an expression of commitment understood by everyone else who did it. She learned Icelandic from Salvar and from watching television. And, thinking she would need to diversify her skills to live in this region, she taught herself first how to use a computer, and then how to do graphic design on it. Their arrival had coincided with the beginnings of the internet becoming mainstream. The world was now at her finger tips, and one thing they had a lot of was time. That is how they lived for those eight winters until moving here.

I had been put in touch with Natalía and Salvar by Paul, a volcanologist friend. Each summer he travels from Lancaster University to the highlands of Iceland to study obsidian – a black

volcanic glass. He met them there, on the campsite at Landmannalaugar, as theirs was the only provisions shop in a 60-kilometre radius. Landmannalaugar was in a national park. There was barely any infrastructure, but each summer visitors would descend in their thousands as it was the beginning, or end, of a famous hiking route: the Laugarvegur ('Way of the Pools'). The eponymous *laugar* was a hot spring around which this campsite had grown over the years, and Salvar and Natalía's business had expanded to meet the demand. Paul used the campsite as basecamp and was one of those rare creatures – a regular visitor with a deeply informed relationship with the landscape. He had a perspective on it that Natalía and Salvar could not have no matter how much they walked in it or lived in it. They in turn had knowledge that enriched Paul's understanding of the country. Each summer saw the continuation of an ongoing conversation, and they had become friends. It was a fortuitous coincidence that my conference was taking place in this town Natalía and Salvar called home in winter, as most international events take place in the capital Reykjavík.

One night they told me the story of their mountain shop. It began in 1996 when they were still art students in Hannover. That summer, Salvar brought Natalía over to Iceland to show her the landscape, and to earn some money fishing. The government had recently issued permission for people to fish as much as they wanted in Frostastaðavatn, a lake near to the Landmannalaugar campsite – then still only a small gathering of tents. Some short-sighted thinking had seen Arctic char introduced to the lake with no competing species. They over-reproduced but none of the fish grew to a significant size. The char population needed reducing quickly. Natalía, the enterprising foreigner, made a connection between the excess of fish and the growing numbers of tourists at the campsite, and they started net-fishing with Salvar's brother Sveinn, selling the handfuls of fish tent to tent.

In a highland desert the offer of fresh food was like a dream, and the fish were bought up willingly. Some tourists during that first season had asked if there was butter or oil to fry it with. Natalía and Salvar gave them some of their own. The next season, Natalía suggested, to Salvar and Sveinn's bemusement, that they should sell butter and oil for more than they bought it for. The idea of making a profit was an alien concept to the brothers. Under Natalía's Outlandish guidance they broadened their provisions supply and within a few years they needed a vehicle from which to sell it. The first was an old army Hammacher. They would park it up on the campsite and tourists would come to them. Every season thereafter, their stock was added to according to tourists' requests. Twelve years and several vehicles later, it has become a perfectly adapted organism – to the restraints of the location and to the needs of the people coming there. They showed me a photo of its current iteration: a mobile

off-grid empire called *Fjallafang* – 'The Mountain's Embrace'. Two green long-nosed vintage American school buses parked head to tail, painted with Arctic char dancing along the sides. One with seating for customers to sit and drink their coffee out of the wind and rain, and the other filled to brimming with everything a hiker might need, *and* fresh fish.

I was taken by the idea of a business growing slowly and adapting to fill a niche, rather than moving in suddenly to occupy a space as many other businesses seem to do. Salvar and Natalía's main objective seemed not to be to make a lot of money, but to provide a service and valuable information to visitors to this special place; to help protect it through their love of it. As tourism was on the increase now, they were enjoying the job less because they no longer had time to have real conversations with people.

The highland landscape is incredibly delicate, they told me. Salvar brought out astonishing photographs of its undulating bare mountains – ochre, purple, rust, teal, and indigo, punctuated with opaque turquoise tarns and steaming hot springs, the tops pocketed with snow. It looked like the beginning of everything. They told me the ground was only exposed from snow for three months a year – June, July and August. Any damage caused during summer would be locked in and exacerbated by the elements for the nine months of winter.

There was barely any infrastructure in this place called Landmannalaugar. Being in a national park, building was not permitted, though Salvar told me the national petrol company and convenience store chains were working hard to have the regulations changed. Before the *Fjallafang* fleet drove in each June and after it departed each September, all that existed was a mountain hut and a shower block. A warden would stay on in the hut into the white expanse of October for the few Icelanders who came with their winter jeeps. 'She loves that time of year, because she can step out of the hut in the morning and just scream,' Salvar said, without comment.

Our long conversations, sat around the table in the 'Winter Palace' would sometimes continue until 2am, when the sun had dipped just below the horizon and cast an outrageous pink all over the sky. The sea and sky were visible in a gap between houses, and I found them irresistible. As my hosts made their way to bed, I would head out onto the quiet empty street to meet the sea, to smell its sighing tidings, to listen to the murmurs of eiders and bask in the glow of the small hours. To have my private moments with this time, this place and this light and this fluttering in my stomach.

One morning, as I wolfed down some muesli in the kitchen and exchanged a few words with Salvar over coffee, the fridge shook momentarily. Salvar lifted a finger and froze as if waiting for something.

'Earthquake,' he said.

'Do I need to worry?'

'*Nei, nei*. The Westfjords is not a very active region. That must've been quite far away, in the south country maybe. I'd better call my mother.'

The shudder had been so brief and Salvar's reaction so relaxed that I continued with my day. It is not how I would have imagined my first experience of an earthquake.

The conference became an afterthought; a place I would go to during the day to sit in a dark room. I listened to Powerpoint presentations and watched ethnographic films about other places in the world. Increasingly Here beckoned much stronger. And when it did, I would go outside. I wondered the backstreets of the town, enjoying the abundance of dandelions in people's gardens and on the verges and the roundabout. They seemed not to be considered weeds. A smattering of bright colour after a long spell of whatever it is that winter looks like up here was probably quite welcome. There were tents up in most of the tiny gardens, which had low picket fences. I was excited by a culture that wanted to sleep outside as soon as the weather was good.

The sun seemed closer to the earth here. It was much hotter than I had come prepared for, but still I wanted to buy an Icelandic jumper. Fortunately, in a small hand knitters co-operative run by women, I found out that there was such a thing as a summer jumper: a thinner knit and sleeveless. I pulled one I liked from a pile on a shelf. 'What size is this?' I asked the woman at the counter. 'Why don't you try it on?' was her excellent reply. I liked these people. The jumper fitted as if it was made for me, and I bought it.

Natalía and Salvar took time off from their summer preparations to take me to a swimming pool in a neighbouring fjord. 'We've seen how much you like to look at things and take pictures,' said Natalía as I climbed into their car. 'So we've cleaned the windows.' Ironically, to get to the pool we spent much of the journey inside a mountain. We drove through its single-track tunnel, which had a junction in the middle. It struck me as a most Icelandic kind

of road planning.

‘Why is it single track?’ I asked.

‘It’s a lot of work digging through bedrock,’ Salvar answered. ‘But they dug into a new water supply – an underground waterfall, which is what serves the town now.’

We arrived in the village of Suðureyri and pulled up outside the only tall building. A mural spanned the end wall and Natalía and Salvar told me it was their creation. Between them they seemed to be the public art people. The building turned out to be the school and the outdoor pool was attached to it. Natalía and I entered the women’s changing room.

‘Shower first, naked,’ she told me.

On the wall was a poster: a map of the human body, showing me where my dirty parts were, in case I was unsure. One button turned on all 8 showers. It seemed rather wasteful.

‘It’s spring water… Plenty of it,’ said Natalía.

‘Geothermal?’

‘Hydro.’

I wasn’t used to guilt-free abundance. The shower was powerful and hot. I lingered there long after Natalía had gone outside and the shower alone would have left me satisfied. But I stepped out to a crystal-clear swimming pool, no smell of chlorine. A mountain rose directly behind the fence. Better still, the pool was flanked by three hot tubs of varying temperatures. I joined Natalía and Salvar in the hottest one and we floated in silence, letting the sun onto our bodies and the heat into our joints. Behind my ears the pool’s overflow gurgled. The other side of the fence a cascade of water trailed down the steep mountainside; literally a white noise finding a route through the scree. I turned on my front and noticed and a flask of coffee.

‘Do we have to…’

‘Help yourself,’ said Salvar.

Free coffee. In a hot tub. Spring-fed. On a mountainside. I wondered that life could be this blissful. I wondered if there was a catch, what was the catch, then soon forgot I was wondering.

‘I love that everyone is camping in their gardens at the moment,’ I said, finally breaking the silence.

‘Camping?’

‘Yeah. I was walking around Isafjörður and there’s tents in almost every garden.’

‘That’s because of the earthquake. In case it’s just the beginning of something. It’s not safe to stay in your house if there’s a stronger one.’

I felt stupid. ‘Where was the epicentre?’

‘In the south country near to my mother.’

‘Is she alright?!’

‘Her house is fine but the road to it has a large crack in it now.’

Perhaps that was the catch – the knowledge that the ground beneath your feet is shifting all the time; that the only thing you can know is what is happening now. Is that a catch?

My memories of that week, spent shifting between the films inside the conference and the constantly surprising reality outside, are a series of hyperreal luminescent images. They cut between close ups of lichen-scribbled rock and the urgent shoot-growth of many species of tiny plants I had never seen, long shots of walking movement through broad vistas of a seemingly new born landscape that felt all mine; mid shots of faces engaged in conversation. The conference is a series of fade to blacks where sleep should have been, but often was not.

One plant that rose above all the others in late May was the umbrella like fronds of wild rhubarb – large waxy dark green leaves atop stout pink stems. It was everywhere: on the hillsides between residential streets; out in the valleys. It was as if it had broken out of a

garden one day and decided to take up residence somewhere freer. I decided to pick some and make a rhubarb crumble for Natalía and Salvar. I did this the next bright evening, after another day in a darkened room. They let me loose in their kitchen and we ate it after dinner, the sour-sweet flavour titillating our tongues for the evening's long conversation. This evening's was to be life-changing.

Natalía stretched her arms above her head, cat-like and let out a moan of pleasure as seemed to be her after dinner gesture. 'Sarah,' she said, as if it was a question. 'We've noticed how well you managed a strange kitchen; making this...how do you say...*Krrrömbel*.'

'Would you like to run *Fjallafang* next summer?' Salvar interjected. 'We've been doing it for twelve summers and we need a break.'

'Yes.' I replied without so much as a second of hesitation.

I am not sure why so little rational processing went on in that moment, other than that I felt that exactly what I was seeking, and yet had not known its specifics, was being offered to me on a plate: a slice of 'wild'. An antidote to the academic London life I had been living. Space, an absence of abstraction. Just me, the mountains and a load of people passing through. As they came and went, I would be staying. Watching the weather change, the meltwater course, the light remain – day and night – until the darkening of August.

'Yes. I really would,' I said almost to myself, sensing I was accepting an invitation to something much greater than a summer job.

Tónleikar – Concert – (*tón* – tone, *leika* – play)

June 2008

I had lifted from the lava fields of Keflavík International Airport to return to London with wet eyes, pooled with images and a longing that took me entirely by surprise. Three weeks later, I am back. It is Midsummer – the exquisite balance point of the year where the night is filled with daylight, and sleep comes when it decides to. I am revelling in my inexhaustible energy and the need for food seems to have been replaced by a direct photosynthesis. The light is bright and Northern, and the air is so clear as to bring great distances close. I can perceive the world in sharp focus – a field is no longer a field but thousands of individual blades of grass.

My first visit felt strangely like a homecoming of sorts. Nothing especially familiar in the architecture or the culture, but the immediacy and rawness of the landscape had engaged in an inspiring conversation with my temperament. 'We need to talk,' it uttered to me then, and we have not stopped since. This time around the feeling is reiterated in the material by my fresh knowledge of the streets and character of Reykjavík; by knowing that the airport bus actually drops off passengers outside their respective hotels, for no extra cost; by understanding the vernacular of the swimming pool changing room etiquette; by being reminded that life really can be this simple.

I don't need to stay in a hotel this time. Filippo, an expat Italian film-maker I met at the conference, has offered me the use of his apartment, though he is not here himself. He has been going through a divorce from his Icelandic wife, and at the conference I had taken the time to listen to his pain. He seems glad of the opportunity to help me out now.

A celestial light floods generously into the apartment's open plan. Each face of the building has an expanse of window glass, smudged with salty residue. Though overlooking the sea, we are still at some distance from it, and the smudges hint at the strong winds that whip at this building on days a million miles from this one. Each window frames a differently spectacular view: a volcanic mountain here, a sparkling rippled sea there, punctuated by the silhouette of a lighthouse. And this is Reykjavík, the capital city, though 'downtown' is really no larger than a village. I have come with a friend this time, and she is equally awe-struck. Filippo has a taste for retro furniture and a fine collection of electronic music. We put on a CD – loud – and dance. This feels like freedom.

My companion on this trip is my London flatmate Uli, a German architect. She has witnessed how changed I was by my visit last month. When I got back, I had told her about the magic of this place and then about Natalía and Salvar.

‘That Russian artist...what did you say her name was again?’. Uli had looked preoccupied.

‘Natalía Mossolova.’

Her eyes lit up with an alchemy of joy and astonishment.

‘You’re not going to believe this, but I went to art school with her in Hannover. I remember that story of her marrying an Icelandic farmer’s son. My mother has one of her artworks!’

She had been easily persuaded that coming with me seemed a fitting conclusion.

Now here we are, in the third week in June. The three-month long summer season is underway, and Natalía and Salvar have travelled the 650 miles south east to go and sell fresh fish, coffee and anoraks to tourists on a campsite beside a natural hot spring. This is the job I have accepted for next summer, and I am beyond curious to see what I have agreed to.

It will take me some time to fathom the Icelandic distinction between Summer and Winter behaviour. Apparently, school holidays begin at the end of May and end in late August. School children are given the opportunity to work by town councils and can be seen in high vis jackets planting out flowerbeds on roundabouts and blowing leaves with a blower. It is not uncommon for employees’ annual leave to amount to six weeks and during that time many take a ‘summer job’ which usually relates to tourism or the outdoors. Or they reunite with extended family at their summerhouses – not a luxury, but almost a given. This rhythm shift makes perfect sense to me, though I have never been to a place where the architecture of life and society so obviously supports it.

Summer is currently all I know, and my only destination. The mountains, the light, the freedom, the elasticity of time. The connectedness of a small population moving through a vast landscape following a long hibernation. Uli and I are going to find Natalía and Salvar in the mountains, and this shop I have agreed to run. But first we have a concert to go to. It was news of this concert that drew me back to Iceland so soon. At the airport on the way

back from the first trip, I noticed in the local headlines that Björk and Sigur Rós – two of my favourite bands and now Iceland's best known musical exports – were giving a free concert at Grasagarðurinn, the Botanic Garden in Reykjavík in three weeks' time. I could not miss it. And more than that, my relationship with this otherworldly place has clearly just begun.

Held under the night sun in Reykjavík's botanic garden, the concert is intended to be the bands' joint effort to raise awareness of the environmental devastation being wreaked by the construction of American-owned aluminium smelters and the hydro-electric power infrastructure necessary to supply them. I have been reading about it: a huge dam was built in the east flooding a vast area and creating a dustbowl around it. Paul is coming too. He has just arrived for his annual obsidian adventure. So too will 30,000 Icelanders. So too will a man I have not yet met, who will one day become my husband.

Uli and I meet up with Paul and we join a steady stream of music pilgrims that can be seen walking from all corners of downtown Reykjavík to fill the park, squinting and basking in the nocturnal sunlight. They seem energised by the formation of a large crowd. Perhaps it is an exciting phenomenon for a small population on a relatively large island.

The concert is a time outside of time, made of light, joy and abandon. The lead singer Jónsi's pure falsetto forms lyrics which belong here. Whether they are Icelandic, English or a language of his imagination does not matter. They seem born from the ground we stand on and the sound penetrates me the way great stories do. His voice is ushered by a heartbeat of marching drums played by an eccentric troupe of women. Some are elfin and delicate; others like warriors. All of them are beautiful. Björk emerges cloaked in ballooning silken technicolour, her forehead painted with triangles of orange, green, blue. She prowls and leaps a visceral dance across the stage. Her voice is limber and uncompromisingly committed. Her small body hurls it around like a kite, trailing out, and looping back again.

We have a good spot near the front. The evening progresses, presumably to night, and the sun continues to beat white gold. We are a little drunk on overpriced beer, and very drunk on all of it. We dance with the Icelanders next to us; one lifts me onto his shoulders for a better view. It is magical to witness these two bands together on home terrain, as Icelanders rather than global superstars, enjoyed by a tenth of the country's population dancing in one park in the capital. The bands are clearly having a blast. Björk chants '*Náttura, Náttura, Náttura!'*. But there are no calls to arms, no mini-lectures on the plight of the pink-footed geese whose habitat was flooded when the dam was built. For a concert to raise

environmental awareness, there is surprisingly little mention of the environment.

From somewhere, perhaps naively, I have Icelanders down as green and progressive. It’s probably the magma-heated swimming pools or just how clean everything seems – the air, the water, the streets. I was hoping this concert would give me the lowdown on the situation here. From what I have seen of this country it is a place where ancient and modern co-exist, or at least different timescales are simultaneously visible – like the airport being in the middle of a vast lava field, or the old parliament at Þingvelllir being a cleft in the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. And it feels like a place where the dearth of man-made layers allows you to see more clearly the effects of your presence and how you might respond; a place I could learn from.

Is it un-Icelandic to put a downer on a joyous occasion by talking about the state of things? Why the silence? Though my idea of ‘engagement’ has been challenged I am having one of the best nights of my life. I will clearly have to dig much deeper to find out about this place. Tomorrow, we will take a coach to the middle of nowhere, to find Salvar and Natalía, and I will find out what my future plans might look like.

Fjallafang – Embrace of the Mountain (*fjall* – mountain, *fang* – embrace; armful)

July 2008

It is reassuring somehow that there is a coach to this place I need to go, especially as nobody knows I am coming. It is a geographical location, but it also feels like a state of being that I am heading towards. From the photos that Natalía and Salvar showed me, it appeared to be a technicolour highland desert in the middle of nowhere, not somewhere that would be served by public transport. This isn't exactly public transport, though. *Reykjavík Excursions* seems to be a private company ferrying passengers to 'the sites' and the airport, and as such is mostly full of tourists. Icelanders don't seem to take coaches. They prefer to drive around in their 4x4s – a metal and glass extension of the personal space afforded by their homes, and the large distances between them. Some of these 4x4s are enormous to my eyes and people clearly feel invincible driving them, most of them too fast.

The coach journey is – a surprisingly short – four hours. It starts from the BSÍ bus station in Reykjavík – a small 1960s block of a building with a glassy white interior that is half-waiting lounge, half-canteen. I have read that the canteen is legendary for being one of the only places in Reykjavík where you can buy takeaway *svið* (boiled singed sheep's head cut in half, with the teeth and eyes still present). I do not take up the opportunity.

The journey starts by cruising out of the sprawling American-inspired suburbs of Reykjavík. Outside of the very small and older 'downtown', Reykjavík does not seem to be a place made for walking. It is made for cars. Though every Icelander seems to have one, Reykjavík is improbably free of traffic jams, which gives an indication of how few people there are. There is bad driving though, as if other drivers don't exist. I've noticed a ubiquitous use of mobile phones *while* driving. Two-thumb texting is a disturbing thing to look down upon from a coach window. We pass industrial estates with shiny car showrooms tempting the soon to be debt-ridden Icelanders to spend money they don't have on yet another 4x4. There are car mechanics, factories and supplies stores presumably stocking all the building blocks of developed life.

Filling the gaps like putty are pizza parlours and burger joints – a cultural legacy of the Americans who kept an air base at Keflavík from which to monitor the Soviet Union. They did not completely withdraw until 2006 and the base, just outside the capital, is now used as Iceland's international airport. All these businesses are fronted in an Icelandic signage whose

design does nothing to suggest what might be inside. This sea of generic ‘industry’ is punctuated by the surging behemoths of familiar icons like IKEA and TOYS ‘R’ US. ‘Surely the whole of Iceland could fit in there,’ I think to myself as we cruise past the IKEA store.

As the right-angled concrete buildings peter out and give in to lava fields, we descend into a flat plain, passing vents of geothermal steam, screaming white against the dark grey brittleness. As we round the bend to Hveragerði, it is revealed how this heat is being put to good use: a sea of greenhouses glowing with yellow light from within, apparently to grow cucumbers, peppers, tomatoes, mushrooms; even bananas – the last more to prove it is possible than to supply demand.

We pass through green rolling farmland – the first crop of hay benefitting from the long days, and indigo swathes of Alaskan lupine in full bloom. My fellow passengers are as enthralled as I am by the view and twitter excitedly like a flock of misplaced parakeets in their colourful Goretex jackets. There is a man on the bus who catches my attention. He is not wearing a colourful Goretex jacket, but a collared shirt and jeans. He looks as I have imagined an Icelander would look, or at least have wanted an Icelander to look: stocky, with short dark blonde hair and a ginger beard that has been left to roam around his chin. His kind nose and pink complexion suggests he spends time outside in the wind, sniffing what news it carries. He seems at once to be engaged totally with the landscape outside the coach – almost part of it – and absorbed in his own thoughts. His alive blue eyes drink deep from the scene and reflect his world back outwards. Uli notices him too. ‘What a man!’ she whispers.

I do not yet know that I will share so much of what those eyes see, and what that nose smells. I do not yet have an inkling of the complexity of the internal world belied by those eyes. I do not yet realise that the landscape we are passing through is where his mother was born and raised, and where his mother’s mother still lives. I will try for years to fathom the many ways in which those facts are related. I know it is true, and I also know it is futile to try to understand it.

After just over an hour the tarmac ends, and the dirt track begins. The next hour and a half is spent being shaken by the result of the too fast 4x4s – an eternal washboard. When you have an enormous 4x4 with enormous tyres, you don’t feel, or care about, the washboard you are creating. The torture is saved for the tourists and those in lesser vehicles. Tourists who hire cars (reasonably) copy what the Icelanders do, thinking they must know best, slicing the landscape into flumes of dust. Each year, the track must be regraded at great

expense.

Through my rattling eyeballs I wonder what their rush can be, to get *there,* as if *here* wasn't worth savouring. All around us another world opens up – an expansive, curious, highland desert unlike anything I have ever seen. We pass a volcano called Hekla, which has been overdue to erupt for some years – its soft dark grey slopes rising out of a flat plain, and covered tentatively in green, like a carpet worn thin. Tracing its downward profile are occasional rivulets lined with the brightest of green moss, fluorescent and soft against the wet black sand.

Our track winds around variegated knolls of scree that dance colours from dark grey to oxide red to pale ochre, as if still burning, like the glow of freshly tempered iron. We pass a lake, choppy and teal blue, cradled by the bare, coloured mountains. I can see one lone rowing boat and a handful of impossibly orange buoys glowing in the littoral light. We have arrived in the technicoloured desert I saw in the photos, but it is so much more: a landscape crisscrossed by a lacework of rivers, held by mountains in a constant state of flux. I feel I am on a threshold.

Mounting a final pass, a glacial river valley opens up beneath us into which we descend. Finally, the camp site comes into view and the coach fords a fifty-metre breadth of deep, fast flowing river – as if that is a perfectly normal thing to do. It is no ordinary campsite. There is not a blade of grass in sight. The ground is all gravel, on a tongue of the river bank. The cacophony of tents is sheltered from behind by a jagged wall of lava the size of a three-storey building. It looks like something between a festival and a refugee camp, on the moon – if the moon was more colourful. When I follow through with what I have agreed to do next summer – to run the shop on this campsite – this place will become my first Icelandic home. Behind the campsite is a mountain that is blue; not in a far off misty mountain way: the rock is *actually* blue. It is, unsurprisingly, called Bláhnjúkur ('Blue Peak') and it will become my neighbour.

We soon find Salvar and Natalía's miniature empire. It is a collection of three vintage American school buses – two green ones parked top to tail right next to each other, and a third blue one a short distance away. The green pair are obviously the shop and café. One has a queue outside, and inside the other, tourists sit huddled around tables clutching their steaming plastic cups like passengers on a train going nowhere. My excitement at springing this surprise visit does not have space for queues, but I will have to wait my turn.

Finally inside, catching the plethora of goods for sale out of the corner of my eyes – onions, muesli, camping mats, toothpaste – I shuffle up to the counter.

‘*Góðan daginn!*’ I say to Salvar as he serves a cup of coffee to a camper.

Salvar always speaks with his eyes first, and voice second. His concentrated stare lifts from the coffee cup and does not register my identity at first. Those eyes cannot compute this person in this place: their recent English houseguest from their northern home, back unannounced three weeks later here in the southern Highlands. When they accept it is real, they widen and stretch. He hands the coffee to the tourist so as not to spill it. He tends to jump up and down when excited.

‘Nataaalíaa!’ he calls out to the back kitchen, jumping up and down.

In a blur of fondness and excitement at what is to come, we exchange hugs and greetings.

‘I’m here for a trial shift,’ I say, half-jokingly, but excited to have a go.

‘Great! I hope you will stay with us? We’re living in a little cabin at a lake near here. Our nephew has just arrived also, but I think there will be space. Did you meet Bjarni?’

Bjarni steps out from the back kitchen, tucking his shirt into his trousers ready to start a shift. Bjarni, that same intriguing man who caught my attention on the coach, is standing in front of me now as Salvar’s nephew. His face still glows a healthy pink. The shop is quite possibly the busiest place in Iceland in this moment, but my reality slows and focusses. It has no sound. Something in the depths of me recognises him. We shake hands smiling shyly at each other, and fizz.

It may only be a few seconds later that I realise that three other coaches have arrived with ours and all the passengers want coffee and sandwiches, now.

I step out of the moment I am in, back into the collective, and shuffle out past the parade of Goretex in red, mustard and acid green, towards the door where my eyes are drawn to the negative space of people – to the landscape beyond their profiles – rather than the people themselves. Everything in my world has just inverted. This place is no backdrop. It is an

active character.

The shop is busy with Laugarvegur hikers. Iceland is being picked up by the tourist radar and the wealthier and more intrepid tourists are making it a hot destination. 'The Way of Pools' I remember Salvar telling me. It was also the name of the main shopping street in Reykjavík, belying the geothermal pools bubbling under that part of the city. A financial collapse is also bubbling beneath the tarmac, though most Icelanders will remain blissfully ignorant for another few months. Soon, tourists will flock here to clamber around affordably in the pristine rubble of a collapsed economy, and a fallen króna.

I know there will be plenty of time to explore the world of *Fjallafang*. For now, it is time to get to know my 'neighbourhood'. The sky is large and bright, but there is an ominousness; a feeling that this is not a place to relax, but to feel energised by the dynamic forces of the mountains and rivers. I am a small creature at the bottom of this gravelly bowl and all around me coloured dust is whipped into the ether from the peaks.

Beyond the flapping triangles of rip-stop nylon is a large wooden hut, and beyond that a bank of steam drifting from an isolated patch of lush vegetation, curling sometimes towards the hut like a special effect, then suddenly swerving off on a different course entirely, carried on the whim of the wind. Outside the wooden hut, campers are using a lean-to of sheltered cooking areas to huddle over their Primus stove Pot Noodles, while others walk in and out of the hut holding towels and wet clothing. This is where all the catching up with reality happens, the basics of mountain-goer maintenance: eating, showering, and the washing and drying of clothes and camping gear.

A wooden walkway begins from this building and hovers across a hot wetland of algae-lined clear streams, rushes, grasses and birdlife to a platform draped in coloured towels like a wishing tree. The streams converge in the cloud of steam, which lifts from a large clear natural pool deep enough to submerge a human body to the chest. In the water there are at least fifty steam-pinked bodies doing exactly this. This is clearly the place to be: a place where you are buffered from the mountains' changeability. This pool is the reason for this campsite's existence – a punctuation mark along the Way of the Pools.

Uli and I decide to join them. My cells, agitated by a shaky journey, and excited by the reality that is unfolding, slow to a gentle bounce then merge with the water around me. I become liquid and utterly content, floating in this moment and the future that awaits me – unknown

but steeped in a wildness that I crave. I rest my head on the tufty grass bank and wildflowers lean over my face as if to see what they make of me. A sheep perches delicately on a hummock island in the hot water and nips at the fresh shoots of grass with bared teeth. It is not a place I expect to see a sheep, but this place has already forced me to leave any expectations behind. The sun comes out, and in doing so feels gracious. My core is warming, and my face is bathed in mountain light. All around me the summer sculpts instinctively with its raw materials – sunlight, snowmelt, wind blow, river flow, rock fall. And over it the ant-like crunch and chink of hikers and their Nordic walking poles – 'stick men' as I later found out Bjarni calls them.

Drying off with my towel, I notice the wind has returned and the sky is overcast for the moment, but my warmth is total. I stand here almost naked in the highland wind and glow from inside. Hot springs are a privilege of life on this patch of the Arctic – a direct link to the inside of the earth's workings.

I return to the shop to buy some lunch. What sits on the shelves is an unexpected treasure trove of necessities and luxuries, from anoraks and camping gas to brie and fresh pastries. People who come into the shop are either cold, underprepared or have just done the four-day hike to arrive here and are visibly delighted with what they find. The most unexpected item – the Arctic char – is a surprise because it makes so much sense: a regular supply of fish from the nearby lake. Fresh fish caught the day before within a few kilometres is a treat wherever you are, but when your diet has been a variety of dried sachets it is especially welcome. Salvar invites Uli and I to the blue bus, which serves as staff quarters, to join in with their lunch – Bjarni and his two younger cousins, Jóhann and Einar are sitting around a lino-covered table and we squeeze in. Lunch is literally a steaming pile of this Arctic char, the origins of this humble empire, covered in butter and a lemon pepper mix that Natalía has invented to complement the fish. Bjarni engrosses himself in this pile, unsuccessfully attempting to conceal his shyness. I am glad I will have time to get to know him when he is off-duty, back at the cabin. He says the odd word to his cousins. His voice is gentle and they and Salvar seem to find him very funny.

Salvar tells me the char are still caught by his brother Sveinn – Einar and Jóhann's father – and still causing as much delight as the day they were first sold. The latest development is that the fish is now available fresh, smoked *and* marinated. I realise it must have been Sveinn that I saw in the rowing boat on the lake, from the coach. Those bright orange buoys were floats for *his* nets. This really is a family affair. The only demand *Fjallafang* has never

responded to, Salvar continues, is alcohol. They could make a killing selling beer to people going to sit in the *laugar*. But experience has taught them that drunk people don't have the capacity to care about littering, and cans and glass bottles do not mix well with hot springs.

Sated, Uli and I go for a walk in the nearby lava field. Natural sculptures loom above us – twisted spires of jagged rhyolite with tussocks of moss pooled in their hollows. Puddles of pink mud encircled with frills of crystallised sulphur surround steaming vents. It is alive and breathing. Around these delicate formations are the gashes made by unbelieving Nordic walking poles. Our need as humans to probe the unfamiliar is all too apparent here and it troubles me. Yes, this landscape is vast. It is easy to tell yourself that a few prods are insignificant. But each hiker has two sticks. Each stick pierces the ground hundreds of times on a walk and is followed by another pair. This slow excavation is the advance party for erosion by the elements, and the act of appreciation inadvertently becomes an act of desecration.

Walking back to the campsite, my eyes more attuned to the details of the landscape now, I notice another unwelcome vestige of visitors – cigarette butts. This air is so clear and so generous. Anyone's preference to breathe nicotine smoke is a mystery to me. I report back to Natalía and Salvar as the shop is selling cigarettes, and therefore partly responsible.

'We're going to stop selling them this year. We'll just sell what we have and that's it. That's why there's only menthol cigarettes and snuff on the shelf! And no tissues either!'

Over the next few days I will watch desperate smokers come in looking to buy cigarettes and realising, probably for the first time in their lives, that their options are hugely limited: refrain entirely or buy something disgusting. After a couple of days, the menthol cigarettes run out and there is only snuff. One man even resorts to that, with a shrug of his shoulders, it probably being the first and last time snuff will grace his nostrils.

The shop closes and we pile into Salvar's jeep to head to the cabin fifteen kilometres away.

The white cabin and a neighbouring gutting shed sit in a black desert, beside a lake lined with fluorescent green algae. There is another bus parked beside it – a vintage US Navy vehicle, inhabited for the summer by Sveinn's eldest son, who helps him catch and gut the fish for the shop and for other businesses including the rural hospital. This cluster of dwellings and work station is watched over by a sheltering wall of sculptural lava towers.

Our cabin is tiny and divided into two rooms: a kitchen, and a sleeping room with bunks. We will all be in the same small room: Natalía and Salvar, Uli, Bjarni, and I.

There is a tension, a curiosity, between Bjarni and I. His complexion makes it hard to tell if he is blushing. His surface seems sweet and gentle, but a blanket to untold depths. He imparts fragments of knowledge within his shyness that are witty and wise. He has an intelligence that is bound up with this place, not an intellectual abstraction. I want to know him.

After dinner the hut draws the evening closer around us. Outside it is still bright but the smallness of the space and the lighting of a candle conjures some dim, and the in-between state of evening. We play cards until stillness settles upon us as it does upon the lake outside. I have been fascinated by the words I have heard exchanged between everyone tonight – their sentences a melody, of a flavour I have not heard before. I ask Bjarni to teach me something. We huddle around the candle with a pen and paper. He shows me the vowels and what they sound like – alone, then with accents on. I repeat after him, watching his eyes and his mouth. *A* (‘a’), *á* (‘ow’), *o* (‘o’), *ó* (‘oh’), *ö* (‘euh’) *u* (‘uh’), *ú* (‘oo’), *e* (‘eh’), *é* (‘ye’), *i* (‘ih’), *í* (‘ee’). It is only when Natalía comes back inside from brushing her teeth by the lake, that I realise I have been entranced by Bjarni for some time. We are in a space two metres square and I had not noticed her go out.

Mataræði – Diet (*matur* – food, *æði* – craziness)

December 25th 2008 – *jóladagur* (Yule Day)

It is the day after Christmas is celebrated here. The 'traditional' meal is eaten and the gifts are unwrapped on the 24th, *Aðfangadagur*, which literally translates as 'Resources Day'.

Today, as is also tradition in Bjarni's family, we have been on a trip to visit his favourite aunt Yrsa. With me in tow for the first time, Bjarni, his parents Gyða and Haukur and his sister Súla are piled into their Toyota Hiyace van. Haukur is driving of course. It seems he is not a passenger kind of man. He does not speak English apparently, and I'm told he is keen that I should learn Icelandic as soon as possible. Súla tells me her name means 'gannet'; that she calls herself Súla because she likes the birds, and it is easier for foreigners to pronounce than her birth name.

Aunt Yrsa lives on a farm a short distance from where she and Haukur grew up in Ísafjarðardjúp – the large deep fjord from which all other fjords in the region branch. From this *djúp* (deep) the smaller fjords reach their fingery depths inland, filling valleys scoured out by glaciers from the mountains like a woodcut. From Gyða and Haukur's house, where we are all staying, the visit to Yrsa has involved a two-hour drive along a winding road that follows the shoreline of these fjords, and now we are travelling two hours back. On this day we are newly acquainted, these fjords and me. It is a journey I will come to make many times. Each time I will get to know each fjord a little better, by name and character: *Álftafjörður* (Swan Fjord), *Hvalfjördur* (Whale Fjord), *Skötufjorður* (Skate Fjord). I will learn that all of these creatures can be, have been, food.

'We don't eat swans any more though,' says Bjarni. 'During the Cod Wars we promised your queen not to eat them in exchange for a 200-nautical mile exclusive fishing zone. It's her totem creature or something isn't it?' he says, smiling ambiguously.

'Something like that.' My face breaks into a grin. Bjarni's 'facts' are plausible enough as to make them, if not totally believable, then at least amusing. I love that he makes me laugh so much.

The Westfjords is one of the remotest parts of Iceland. To me it is by extension one of the remotest parts of the world. No map, no list of distances, can relate what it feels like to be

here, and what such a location yields as a cultural and culinary legacy.

I got to feel its remoteness with my body and my senses two days ago as Bjarni drove me here from Reykjavík: the entire eight-hour journey was made in the dark. I had only ever flown to the region before, to the tiny 'capital' Ísafjörður – the location of my conference last year and of Gyða and Haukur's house. The spaces in between remained unknown to me. This time, we had intended to fly but our morning domestic flight was cancelled: high winds were blowing in the wrong direction at this end. We were supposed to be arriving in time for a party that Bjarni's parents host every year for family and friends on *Þorláksmessa* (The Mass of St. Þorlákur) – the 23rd of December. It was to be the first time I would meet his family and neighbours, and Bjarni had made out there was quite a buzz surrounding my arrival. I suppose I am a curiosity. A foreign girlfriend, an *útlendingur* (Outlander), despite the fact that everyone is a foreigner here if we go back only twelve hundred years. He told me that we would eat *skata:* fermented ray wings.

Sitting at Reykjavík Domestic Airport wondering how we would make it in time for the party, I remembered the airstrip at Ísafjörður from my first trip, tucked at the bottom of a narrow-sided fjord; how the wing tips almost brushed the mountainsides. I could imagine that there was no room for variables: the criteria for safe landing were already in a delicate balance.

We did not drive away from Reykjavík until 3pm, at which point the narrow window of daylight was almost over. The whole journey beyond Reykjavík was made in the dark. It had taken a long time to find an economical plan B. Nobody Bjarni knew was driving up who could offer us a lift. This had taken many phone calls to establish. Instead we hired a car at great expense and tried to fill it with people he knew to share the cost of petrol. This had involved more phone calls and waiting for other people who had not yet made a plan B, or even a plan A.

'*Þetta reddast*,' Bjarni had assured me on several occasions – 'It will work itself out'. He did not seem at all bothered that we may well miss the party that he had made out was such an important occasion. Leaving so late revealed two things. One: that Icelanders, or perhaps just Bjarni and his friends, do not deem it worthwhile to find a solution to a problem before it arises. He tells me winter flights are regularly cancelled due to wind direction, but it does not seem reason enough to have a back-up arrangement. Two: I learned just how dark darkness can be when not perforated by the light of habitations or street lights at regular

intervals. During the eight-hour journey, sometimes through snow, we passed perhaps three villages; three patches of luminosity. The rest was totally black.

Whilst Bjarni drove, I had tried to grasp some sense of a reality from the spots of illuminated road as we passed over it, on and on. It was a strange way to travel through a country for the first time, imagining everything I was passing through based only on what I had read, seen, or what Bjarni was telling me. In the middle of what seemed like absolutely nowhere, Bjarni had pulled over and asked if I fancied a dip in a hot spring. A light snow blizzard cross-hatched the view through the windscreen, the nearest snowflakes illuminated by the headlights, leaving trails in my vision like comets.

'Where?' I had asked, peering futilely into the darkness and snow outside.

'There's a hut just up there with a tiny pool in it.'

As tempting as the idea of hot water was, I could not see this hut. I was impressed Bjarni knew where it was so instinctively. After hours of travelling through total darkness, I had no inkling of the nature of the place and could not get my head around taking off all my clothes here in sub-zero temperatures. Also, we were already late for the party. I declined, and we drove on.

We passed his Aunt Yrsa's farm.

'Don't you want to say hi?'

'We'll come for a visit in a couple of days.'

In the absence of visuals Bjarni fed me titbits of local knowledge. This road was only tarmacked all the way up here from Reykjavík in 2000. I could only imagine how long the journey took before that. Until most boats became motorised in the mid 1900s the Westfjords was home to only the hardiest of inhabitants. Norse settlers had come with their Celtic wives and slaves from the ninth century on. Their legacy is everywhere, from the treeless landscape to Bjarni's red beard. Dedicated fishermen and whalers sailed from as far away as Spain and the Basque country for centuries, such was the catch to be had in the waters here. In the winter of 1615, Basque whalers were stranded here for several months when their vessels were destroyed by a storm. There was not enough food to go around, and they had been

stealing from farmers – so the story goes. In response to mounting tension, the local sheriff at the time issued a decree allowing Basques to be killed on sight, and residents at Aunt Yrsa's farm had been amongst the farmers who had murdered more than thirty of them. It is a law particular to the Westfjords, which has still not been officially repealed. My best friend in England is Basque.

'Tell her to be careful if you invite her here!' Bjarni chuckled.

Other encounters were more peaceful: the Iberian legacy manifests still in dark hair and brown eyes, here and there.

The Westfjords is bypassed by Route Number One, the ring road which circuits 'the whole country' according to my guidebook. The book indicates that most visitors to Iceland do a self-drive trip around this ring road. More intrepid travellers divert to the Westfjords where, like me, they must be patient as the orange light-pricks of their destination creep imperceptibly closer, as the road meanders up and down and up and down the shores of the finger-like fjords. The destination is typically Ísafjörður, which Bjarni's parents share with two thirds of the region's population, and most of its services. The lights you can make out from a distance are a few streetlights on the approach. The town itself is tucked inside a fjord. As the raven flies, the distance to Ísafjörður is only one hundred kilometres from the region's southernmost portal, Hólmavík. But that hundred kilometres takes four hours to travel, along two hundred and twenty kilometres of road.

We finally arrived at 11pm. Sitting in a car all day and scanning the darkness for sources of stimulation and orientation had left me exhausted. Suddenly we entered a house full of light and people, fairy lights around every window, and tables set up throughout the living room, dining room and kitchen like a pop-up café. Bjarni was right: I had clearly been the talk of family and friends, and their curiosity upon my arrival was overwhelming.

Not quite as overwhelming as the smell that hit me as I crossed the threshold. Navigating the etiquette of embrace versus handshake versus kiss, I was entirely distracted by the fact that Gyða and Haukur's house smelled strongly of ammonia. Their curiosity did not relate to my background or my journey north. It was mainly about how I would react to the *skata,* which turned out to be skate fermented for weeks and then boiled – the source of the smell. What could I say? It was just-bearably disgusting. It burned both my tongue and a place at the back of my nostrils and throat of which I am usually unaware unless I accidentally inhale

seawater.

Chatting to the guests, it emerged that many Icelanders do not enjoy *skata* either. ‘So, my new family isn’t typical?’ I had asked one of them.

‘Typical from before 1950’, he had responded with a knowing smile.

I realised that whatever they were I would have to love them, as they were already being referred to as my *tengdaforeldrar* (‘connected parents’): a term equivalent to ‘in-laws’ that pays no heed to marital status or, as it turns out, to whether we have been together very long. A serious intention for the relationship seems to be sufficient.

* * *

‘*Matur!!!!*’ has been the daily dinner cry in the few households I have visited since – all belonging to Bjarni’s extended family – calling diners to the table. I have arrived at plates of food which mostly look like plates of food I recognise, usually involving fish or lamb.

The ‘traditional’ Christmas meal at my in-laws’ yesterday took me further on my journey into new culinary territory. The tradition was particular to them, and a relatively new tradition at that. Apparently, on 24th most families eat rack of ham. It used to be roasted ptarmigan, but they are becoming scarce. At six o’clock, immediately after the state radio broadcasted the ringing of church bells from Reykjavík and Bjarni’s sister had finished lighting all the candles, the family gathered at the table, dressed up for the occasion. Onto it, Gyða placed a baking tray with five cows’ tongues – one for each of us – side by side, the rough grey coating as appealing as coarse-grade sandpaper. To my eyes, a tray of body parts was incongruous with everyone dressed in their finest. It was a scene from a *noir* film. But I tucked in with everyone else and the tongues were tasty, I had to admit.

I had eaten tongue before in England, but not *a* tongue. When I asked Gyða about the unusual choice, she told me that one year, a farmer had been getting rid of some cows’ tongues. My in-laws are renowned for their tastes and resourcefulness, so he had rung to alert them to the potential haul. They could not bear good food going to waste, so they drove to the farm – not a small distance away – to collect the tongues. The great unveiling happened for Christmas dinner that year, baked in the oven whole. They enjoyed them so much that the tradition continues.

Today has pushed me still further. Two days after arriving, I am travelling again on the same road that brought me to Bjarni's parents, to that *skata* party, to the Christmas dinner of tongues. This time, at least, I can see what I am travelling through. The landscape is silenced by a thickness of snow. The sky glows a pinkish blue the colour of something cold ripening, it being shortly before dusk at three. We drive with the fjord on our right now, rough snow-covered fields descending to it, and just a few scattered summer houses closed up for the foreseeable future. Steep basalt cliffs rise to our left, the dusting of snow picking out their dark crumbling terraces. On several occasions we pass frozen waterfalls: vast columns of ice suspended until warmer weather, like mute organs in a glacial church. It is a beautiful still day, and the calm sea mirrors the colours in the sky.

'*Hvað þetta er fallegur spegildagur!* (What a beautiful mirror-day!)' delights Gyða, clasping her mittened hands together in the front passenger seat. A 'mirror-day', Bjarni needs not explain, is when the sea is so calm that visible reality is perfectly doubled in it. I infer from Gyða's excitement that it is not a common occurrence. I don't know if it is a term she has just made up, but a person or culture that came up with such a metaphor is clearly one that lives day in day out with the vicissitudes of water and wind and feels fortunate when the weather is benevolent. I wonder if a mirror-day also implies a greater capacity for internal reflection, but that is an abstract topic of conversation for a Christmas family trip and I don't know her well enough to ask.

The road strikes through Haukur's family land at *Kálfavík* (The Bay of [Whale] Calves). The land is mostly snow-blanketed tussocky fields sloping down to the fjord. There is a white concrete farmhouse with a red roof, standing stoically and alone. The road traces its path between the farmhouse and the steep cliffs which shelter the farm from behind, aloof and majestic. As a boy, Haukur told me through Bjarni's translation, the farm was accessible only by boat. On a Sunday evening he and the other children in the *djúp* and surrounding fjords would be collected by the school boat and taken to the weekly boarding school two fjords away.

His family kept sheep and cows, and everything they ate they produced and preserved, or the sea provided. Among these foodstuffs, lamb was smoked with sheep droppings or birch twigs, and *skata* was fermented for several weeks by leaving it in a sealed box. Faster boats and faster roads changed everything for farmers and fishermen. They were, willingly or not, exposed to the ways and goods of the outside world. But despite that and despite the

enormous fridges now in every kitchen, people still eat both smoked lamb and *skata* – especially the Westfjordians and especially at Christmastime. The birch-smoked lamb is delicious, but I doubt I will ever be persuaded by the *skata.* For Haukur, his early years remain the Glory Days, and 'foreign food' like pizza and hamburgers is an aberration which he refuses to eat outright.

The silence in which he grew up is punctuated now and then by a passing car. Such cars are probably carrying younger Westfjordians, just like Bjarni and Súla and most of their cousins, back south to Reykjavík after their Christmas family visits, or older Westfjordians back north, having visited their children who have moved away. Or rather back 'west' as Gyða corrects me. So distinct is the Westfjordian identity that when they are travelling south towards Reykjavík, they say they are 'going south'. But on the journey home – an identical journey in reverse – they are 'going west'. Occasionally the lapping of waves and the steadfastness of the cliffs is criss-crossed also by the rumble and scanning headlights of refrigerated *Eimskip* lorries, transporting the latest fish catch to Reykjavík for export, or coming back with goods *frá útlöndum* (from The Outlands).

'*Hvalskurðará.*' Haukur points to the largest waterfall we have yet passed, right beside the road. This one has not frozen. The water is too powerful. It is spectacular, but he doesn't stop the van, or even slow down. He has seen it many times, even if I have not.

'It means Whale-cutting river,' Bjarni explains. 'It's the boundary of my father's land. The water flows reliably year-round and back in the day that was useful if you were butchering a whale.'

We round the head of the fjord in which Haukur's cherished way of life played out and died. He drives the van like somebody who has served a long apprenticeship with this landscape; who instinctively knows all of its bends and gradients. I am still adjusting to his concession to modernity – an obsession with the radio which has two main characteristics: loud and constantly on. He mostly listens to Radio One – the better of the two stations, thank goodness.

On a peninsula he slows to a halt and looks to his right. It is a perfect panorama; an Arctic palette: a backdrop of corrie and glacier, a foreground of dark boulders silvered by the sighing sea and caressed by tendrils of dulse. Economical with conversation at the best of times, not one member of my Icelandic family thinks to point out that we are looking at

something more specific than the view. Apparently, it is obvious. Haukur turns off the engine but the radio barks on. Suddenly as my eyes adjust to detailed focus I wonder how I could not have seen them straight away: a colony of recumbent seals lolling on the boulders, their skins shining with the day's reflection, looking up at us with the minimum of exertion.

'*Shhhh!*' I press my finger to my lips, as if that would make the radio quieten of its own accord.

The seals' heads lift but their bodies remain resolutely slumped. Their stare is intense: a liquid black, and somehow disarmingly human. It is the first time I have seen so many seals, so close, and I am enchanted. Radio One does not seem a fitting soundtrack for this moment.

'*Góður matur!*' Haukur remarks. 'Good food.'

Shocked, I climb out of the van to get closer to the enchanted version of this scene, joining Bjarni at the shore. I am not ready for what Haukur has just said.

Bjarni is making a low polyphony from pursed lips – a hum and a whistle simultaneously. The seals watch him, intrigued. One even dislodges itself from its perch and plops into the glassy sea, emerging closer to us with a blast from its nostrils, as if waiting for the main act.

'They like sounds actually,' he says. 'Even the radio. They're very curious'.

'Good Food?' I think to myself. 'Good *food*?!'

<u>Gíslholt</u>

June 2009

I am back for the summer to fulfil the promise I made a year ago. Salvar and Natalía are handing over their business to Bjarni and me for a season, so that they can have their well-deserved break. We have come to Gíslholt to prepare. It feels like base camp: this is where the buses are kept all winter, and supplies converge here. I've heard Salvar refer to this part of Iceland as 'the flatlands', which it is, relatively. As you turn onto a dirt track from the tarmacked ring road – the only major road encircling the country – a blue road sign is scribbled with white lines forking ever outward like branches on a tree. Each line leads to a small white square with a name. It is the kind of sign you can only make sense of if you already know the terrain and is refreshingly absent of angles and simplification. Gíslholt is the only word I recognise, but I have heard it many times already – referred to as the centre of the origin myth of Bjarni's mother's side of the family. As we drive the tracks the sign represents, undulating green hills nestle scattered farmsteads: these squares and names I do not yet understand. They are close enough for community, distant enough for a kind of personal space that feels to me like an Icelandic birth right.

The light is bright, and the sky is white, but it is not warm. Clouds hang like proffered blankets, not threatening rain, but reminding me that though it is almost midsummer, this is the Arctic. To reach the farmhouses at Gíslholt we have crossed a short grassy causeway between two small lakes like cataracts, reflecting the milky sky. The houses are on raised ground. *Holt* means 'hill'; I know that much. But the 'flatness' of this region is brought into sharp relief by the edifice of Hekla volcano. Hekla is also an Icelandic girls' name, I have noticed – one of Bjarni's many cousins bears the name. Hekla the mountain stands sturdily and alone behind these hillocks, like a matriarch in an old family photograph where she is the only remaining elder. Her shoulders are mantled in cloud, made blue by the distance.

Gíslholt is the farm in the south country where Bjarni's mother and her six siblings grew up. His grandmother, the matriarch of this family, has remained here since her husband's death. One of her sons, Sveinn, has taken on the sheep farm and lives in a house built next door to hers. In one of the hay barns he stores and maintains the three buses that comprise the *Fjallafang Mountain Mall* empire. I ask Bjarni to remind me what *Fjallafang* means. 'The embrace of the mountain,' he smiles proudly. We have come to check the buses are in working order, fill them with all the supplies mountain lovers may need, and drive them out

into the highlands. Our journey will take us around the base of Hekla, and on across rivers and lava deserts into that land of colour which in the intervening year I have only seen in pictures. It continues to defy belief though I have been there. Were the mountains really ochre, purple, russet and green; milky meltwater rivers of turquoise charging between valleys venting the sulphurous exhalations of the inside of the earth? This otherworld is about to become my home and place of work for three months.

Nothing at Gisholt begins before *kaffi og kökur* – coffee and cakes. After greeting Sveinn we go to visit Bjarni's grandmother Amma Sigga, Bjarni knocking on the door and walking straight in. He removes his shoes and pads through to the kitchen in thick woollen socks. I follow suit. She is already laying the table with a spread that involves far more than coffee and cakes. The treeless landscape allows incoming visitors to be seen from some way off, mobilising Icelandic hospitality to be in good time. The kitchen is compact and cosy – the units a shade of mustard yellow that look unchanged since the 1970s. I wonder how she used to fit all her children in here. Appearing on the table are *kleinur*, a knot-shaped donut; buttered *flatkökur*, a flatbread, topped with *rúllupylsa* – sliced spirals of pink lamb flank and fat; *rugbrauð*, a treacly dark rye bread, and *kæfa* – a paté derived from some part of a sheep that I can enjoy if I don't ask too many questions.

She greets us with a kiss and beckons us to sit around the spread. 'How long have you two been together?'

'A year…ish,' Bjarni responds.

'Ah. You'll still want to look *at* each other, then.' She gestures to seats on opposite sides of the table. 'One day you'll want to look in the same direction.'

Bjarni and Amma chat away in Icelandic and I enjoy listening to the tunefulness of the words, picking up a fragment here and there. But mainly I partake of her love though sampling the spread and watching the two of them – Bjarni sweet and tender with his favourite and only remaining grandmother. She is a short woman with cropped grey hair, and glasses, whose body isn't quite keeping up with her lively mind but is close behind. Her face seems to communicate anything the rest of her body cannot: her features dance above and below her glasses in constant motion, like a sheep dog rounding up a flock. Her expression seems always to be seconds away from kind amusement at somebody's expense, and dangly earrings swing either side of her face in accord with the excitement. Amma is clearly

enjoying seeing Bjarni in a relationship – this shy boy she once knew becoming a man, having a sense of purpose. Love reinvents families as well as the individuals that make the couple.

Finally, Bjarni, realising that I have been silent for a while, thinks of a point of shared interest. He knows I make jewellery.

'Sarah! Amma collects earrings. Would you like to see them?'

Of course I would, and she leads us through to a bedroom where there are about twenty pairs neatly displayed in a wooden box with a glass lid. In another country and another century, they would have been butterflies. Some of the earrings are made of recognisable materials like wood, and ribbon.

I notice a dangly pair with small globes of dark brown hanging from the hooks. 'What's that?'

'*Lambaspörð',* she smiles, darting a humoured glance at Bjarni.

I can figure that out: lamb shit earrings. This woman is crazy, and I love it. 'And those?'. I point to a pair made of small frilled ovals of bone the size and shape of a wood louse.

'Those are cod otoliths.' Bjarni informs me nonchalantly.

'What's an otolith? And Bjarni, how do you *know* these things?!' Not for the first time, I'm impressed by the breadth of his vocabulary.

'A bone in the inner ear of the fish. I think it helps them balance.'

I'm not sure what to make of this. Is this what Icelanders are like, or what Bjarni's family is like? All I know is that their eccentricity and matter of factness about shit and body parts, their ability to see them as objects of beauty, makes me crackle with excitement at the world revealing itself anew.

'Bjarni...do you need any clothes?' Amma Sigga asks, stepping back into the kitchen and making her way to the hall.

‘What have you got?’

She pulls a ladder down from a trapdoor in the ceiling.

‘Everything’. She nimbly climbs the ladder up to the loft, and we follow as far as the opening. It opens onto several rooms, but each is filled to the ceiling with bulging black bin bags. There is barely room for one person up there. Amma Sigga begins untying them one by one and pulling out items of clothing.

‘*Nærbuxur?*’ She throws an enormous pair of greying Y-fronts at Bjarni, laughing.

‘Awesome!’

‘Bjarni! You’ve *got* to be kidding...’

‘What?’

‘Old man’s underpants?!...’ By now he has climbed down the ladder and pulled them on over his corduroys. It is clear that he is not going to part with them, especially now he’s seen how fun it is to wind up his woman.

I hear my name and Amma Sigga throws me a beautiful sage green dress with buttons down the front flanked by a fine trim of lace. It is practical and pretty, and exactly my size. ‘*Takk*!’ I smile.

‘Why does Amma have all these clothes Bjarni?’

‘She collects them for the Women’s Institute. But they don’t have sales that often.’

Uncle Sveinn suddenly appears at the bottom of the ladder. ‘Come around for dinner later? My friend has been fishing in Ölfusá river and he’s brought me a salmon. He’s big. Enough to go around.’

‘*Já takk!*’

He's big. I enjoy that these nouns I live alongside have a gender, even when Icelanders are speaking English. 'It' is easier to commodify, but 'he' and 'she' become beings I must acknowledge a relationship with. I realise it has been a while since I have traded any money for anything. As soon as we are off the 'main road' it seems money is not required. With such a big family, my existence with Bjarni is intensely abundant. They are all resourceful hard-working folk; not rich. But somebody has always got the thing you need, and food and generosity is plentiful. Though it is an expensive country, with this alternative economy pulsing underneath the official one, it seems that with time, kindness and intimacy this could be a very sustainable place to exist.

I certainly do not feel at the epicentre of a financial crisis with this family – Iceland's reputed identity as of October last year. I realise it will be more complex than appearances show, but there certainly seems to be a resilience in the fact that no one here is an island, even if they live on one. In the sagas the greatest punishment was to be outlawed, separated from kin and society. It was only two generations ago that many Icelanders were extremely poor. Anyone alive today seems dedicated to making their realities at least *feel* they comprise all the comforts their ancestors were deprived of, even if it is bought on credit. Despite this cultural memory of poverty, in this family I have noticed the *gamla daga* (old days) always referred to with fondness; with a suggestion that it was a time of moral integrity that has been eroded with the arrival of wealth.

New clothes acquired, there's time for a walk before the next instalment of eating. I have been braced for hard work today but that is clearly not how this business operates. With Sveinn in the kitchen cooking his unanticipated bounty of salmon, he will not be in mechanic mode for the Mountain Mall buses today. Salvar and Natalía have not yet arrived to show us the ropes. So, all there is to do is reconnect with land and family.

Bjarni takes me first to an out building beside Amma's house. At one end is a room that is home to a clucking vitrine of twenty white and auburn hens who peer at us through uneven single-glazed windows. Their red combs flash through the reflection of a pinkening sky. Bjarni talks to them tenderly: he seems to be as kindly with animals as with his elders. We enter the building through a peeling red door into a large bare room with a concrete floor.

'Slaughterhouse', Bjarni tells me.

'Sveinn kills his own sheep?'

‘Some of them. Just for family consumption. We come and help. And with the butchering. It’s a nice time to see family. We’ll come sometime.’

Though supermarkets and home fridges are stocked full, and it is possible to buy anything you would need, this gathering around the processes of raising sheep for meat seems to be an emotional need as much as a practical one. Sheep and Icelanders arrived on this rock together.

I look out of the window. These green rolling hills are now bathed in a low golden light and the sky is bleeding pink into purple. The sun is not going to set, but I have observed at this time of evening the air shifts – becoming windy for a while before settling into a cool bright night. I notice a silhouette of furry strips pegged to a string hanging across the window. It looks like some kind of ritualistic garland.

‘What are those...in the window?’

‘Mink tails. The state pays per tail.’

‘What...is Sveinn a mink hunter as well?’

‘Every farmer will kill a mink if they see one. They’re destructive little bastards. They’ll eat all the hens. They’re not supposed to be here. Some idiot once thought it would be a good idea to start a mink farm in Iceland and some got out, so now we have them running around in the wild.’

‘Right.’

I have a sepia-toned fantasy of a government inspector on horseback paying a visit to a farmer, travelling around the countryside with a logbook counting mink tails like beads on an abacus, and handing over a wad of notes. It is almost certainly not like that. But here it does feel like we are still in another era: pre-crisis, but *long* before. A time where ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’ were directly linked, and straightforward.

‘Shall we go up the hill before it gets any colder?’

‘It’s not cold.’

‘OK, I’d like to go up the hill before *I* get too cold.’

‘Sure.’

I am becoming aware of how subjective are my value systems. And Bjarni, in his very gentle way, picks me up on it. I enjoy the challenge, but with everything being so new to me, it happens a lot. I feel, like I never have before, that I am going to be profoundly changed by this place.

Bjarni and I make our way up the hill – the holt – behind the farmhouses. The light is beautiful now, the hanging paleness of day giving way into an almost fluorescent sunset and a vista as expansive as our possibilities. We do not need much altitude here to be able to see all around. At the top I feel like I am standing in the crow’s nest of a tall ship sailing on a sea of green. In the distance Hekla stands crisp and clear as a cardboard cut-out, the colour of a bruise. She is majestic.

‘So, we’ll be living beneath a volcano that is overdue to erupt?’

‘We can make sure the van’s always got enough petrol for an escape.’

Problem. Solution. Why was life in England so complicated? I am also quite sure I would never have been allowed to put myself in the way of this particular ‘problem’ in England. There would have been a pre-emptive restriction on travel within a huge radius of the volcano. But when the country you live in *is* a volcano, you have to keep on living your life. You have to trust that the complex array of tremor detectors and the well-practiced strategies by the emergency services and volunteer rescue teams will run like clockwork.

<u>Seal Wife</u>

September 2008

The postcard Bjarni has sent me features a hand painted seventeenth century map of Iceland: *ISLANDIA* by Abraham Ortelius, Antwerp. Rendered in a gruesome, many-fingered form, like a tumour reproducing itself, the landmass is embellished with spines of mountains and the fire and brimstone rendition of Hekla as an active volcano. Though it was not erupting at the time the map was made, the imagined memory of the last eruption clearly burned brightly in the map maker's mind. All around the shores, sea monsters swim, gallop, breach, prance, keeping lesser mortals at bay. Only those with true determination and faith would cross the waters to land on those shores. I am not yet one of them.

On the reverse is a smaller map, with a handwritten arrow pointing to a place on the east coast. In blue spidery letters:

The arrow points at Húsavík, the place where the seal tried to lure me into the sea. I have sent you 7 crystals from the shore.

Inside the accompanying package there are indeed seven crystals. Seven sea rounded quartz pebbles the size of boiled sweets and the colour of translucent ivory. They click and grind melodically in my fingers, inviting prolonged caress. Their smoothness is calming. They harbour millennia: folded and polished, folded and polished. Near to their surface, near to present time, they hold the story of Bjarni's seal wife.

September 2009

We are on the eastern leg of our round-the-country tour in our camper van – a month-long journey at the end of the tourist season, parking up wherever we feel like it. Bjarni wants to show me his country while we have the time and flexibility to explore. He wants to take me to a bay where, not so many years ago, he had an encounter with a seal – a tale which he recounted when we first met, and has enchanted me with time and again.

'Tell me how it happened!' I ask, like a child, as our van bounces down a heathland track

towards the sea. A salmon pink mountain, cross hatched with striations and inclusions of black, as if drawn on by a charcoal pencil, recedes in the rear-view mirror.

‘I was on a road trip around the country, a bit like this one, but alone. I went down to this shore, where we’re going now, at night. The waves were gentle, and lapping. I noticed a sound, like, like a...singing. The waves washed over the pebbles and each time they drew back, I realised the stones *were* singing! *Kllllllllllllllllllllll...Kllllllllllllllllllll...*’ He looked at me and shimmied his right hand as he made the sound with tongue against teeth, the delight of the memory washing across his face with each lap of a wave.

‘I picked up a stone and realised it was quartz. The *whole beach* was covered in rounded quartz pebbles. I lay down to listen and before long I was lulled into sleep.’

‘And then?’ I press, knowing full well what next.

‘When I woke up I was half way up that hill...see how steep it is?’ He points to his left. We are nearing the bay now. ‘I couldn’t understand how I got there. I tried to return to the beach and it was tricky even when fully awake. I had to scramble almost vertically down a cliff.’

I can picture the whole scene in my head. Bjarni is an excellent storyteller. Whether his stories are true or not is irrelevant. They are absolutely believable.

‘When I got to the beach the sun was coming up and it was turning into a *beautiful* morning. I sat contemplating what had happened in the night. Had I sleepwalked, shape-shifted, tele-transported? This beach had made that sort of thing seem plossible...is that how do you say it?’

‘Plausible’.

‘...Plausible, yes. And then, in the calm water, a seal appeared, and looked at me with these big, black, very *human* eyes. She locked my gaze. Then she turned her face to one side, again and again, beckoning with her head for me to follow her into the sea. A seal wife.’

This was not the first time Bjarni had been in a familial relationship with a seal. When we first fell in love, his mother Gyða had shown me an album of photographs of him as a baby

and as a child, in that universal way that mothers embarrass their children. Though he was not embarrassed at all and I was far more curious about what was happening around the woollen swaddled bundle of his baby body. One photograph in particular had captivated me: Gyða lying on the floor, suckling Bjarni with the knuckle of one hand and bottle feeding a baby seal with the other.

'It had been crying in the sea just below our house,' she had told me. 'It had lost its mother we think, so we tried to feed it. But it became weak and died.'

It was a practical response to a problem on their doorstep – one neighbour trying to help another – but the lack of boundary between the human and animal worlds moved me. The motto in this family, and indeed in general here is '*bara prófa'* – 'just try'. In some senses, Bjarni had attained mythological status through that photograph, at least as far as I was concerned: a boy co-raised with a seal pup. But more enchanting still was how normal it all felt in this family. The unprecedented shapes of new realities would continue to slip out casually the longer I spent with them, like rough diamonds spilling out of a torn pocket, and paid no heed.

'I didn't follow her,' Bjarni continues. 'My road trip had grounded me, and I didn't feel like running away. But I would like to take you to meet her, if she is still there.'

The vista opens up as the bay comes into view. The water is an inky black but dances with the blue of the sky and the pink of the mountains that embrace it.

'And what was the part about your hands again?' I said, recalling that there was a bizarre appendage to this tale.

'Oh yes! When I got out of this dream world where I climbed mountains in my sleep and got accosted by a seal, I went to the swimming pool in Reyðarfjörður to get clean. In the pool I looked at my palms and they had turned light blue. I thought I might be hallucinating, so I asked someone in the changing room what colour they were. They saw blue too. Something in my instinct told me it was to do with an electricity I had felt on top of that headland.'

He pointed again. We were snaking beneath the headland now. From here I could gauge its steepness empirically, and wondered how anyone could scale it in their sleep. I grinned at

the bizarreness of it all. The autumn air coming in through the half-open van window fizzed with the magic of the right story told in the right place.

'When I woke up after teleporting up it, or whatever I did, something strange happened. It was sunny. The sky *all* around was clear and blue. There was a swamp and I decided to walk into it. As I did, a mist closed in around me – just at that place, just at the swamp. Inside the fog it felt as if electricity was...*crackling* through me. It felt like I could shoot *lightnings* out of my hands! So yeah...maybe that's what turned them blue.'

It is a mind-bending story, but a good one, and I have spent long enough in Iceland not to be dismissive of things that sound improbable, as I begin to see equally improbable things with my own eyes.

We pull up above the beach which has a bed of black sand. It makes the water at once so dark and so reflective – exactly like a mirror. The shoreline is a hem of pebbles scattering ever more sparsely up the beach. We climb out to explore our stopping place for the night, and this place of promised magic.

'Oh.' said Bjarni with a tone of disappointment.

'What?' I wondered. It looked beautiful to me.

'Look. It's not covered in quartz pebbles anymore.' He bent to pick one up. 'There's a few but this is *nothing* compared to last time. And look there's tyre tracks in the sand. *Huge* ones.'

The clues point to a reality far from the magic Bjarni conjured in the van. Somebody has evidently come down with a truck and scavenged the beach, wholesale, for these treasures. I am still getting used to how pristine everything looks to my eyes, but what Bjarni can see is devastation. He is deflated. 'Looks like my seal wife is not here either.'

As the evening dims to night - a novelty for our eyes in itself – we sit on the dry sand at the top of the beach and build a fire of driftwood twigs. We listen to the crackle of it, and the wash of the waves, though I will hear no crystals singing. Bjarni feels for two quartz pebbles within his reach, weighing them up for appropriate shape and size in his fingers. Satisfied,

he begins to strike them against each other. The smell of burning rock, not unlike an overheated gear box, hits my nose immediately. Suddenly the quartz illuminates, and disappears again.

'Oh my god that's *beautiful*!' I sing, quickly looking around for two pebbles of my own with which to play this game. This is pure delight: the discovery of something otherworldly in a piece of matter I may have walked over, ignorant of its qualities. Each moment like this opens me still further to the truths in these stories. Had I told someone about a beach covered in stones that glowed from within when they hit against each other, would it have been any more, or less, believable than a seal who tried to accost a man?

'People are probably buying these in magic shops all over Europe now,' Bjarni curses.

It makes me think about all the times I have encountered beautiful objects in shops. How, as much as we may like to think of ourselves as being interested in the objects' provenance, or whether they are 'ethical' or 'fair trade', we cannot ever really know how those objects intersected with the lives of the people and creatures living among them. These stones will not sing on a shelf in a gift shop. They may glow, if given an appropriately corny name, and if accompanied by an instructional 'how to use' leaflet. But they will never again be stumbled upon by a man trying to find himself, to be the soundtrack to his journey along the littoral of waking and dreaming.

The next morning, we explore the shoreline, focussing, as we tend to do, on our own patches, and our own spheres of interest. I am taking photographs of the seaweed as it curls and plops around shells and pebbles. Bjarni has a foraging basket and is dangling his hand into the seaweed in deeper water to see if there are any mussels.

There is a wet puff of air five metres from us.

'*Halló kerling. Þartna er tu!*' Bjarni talks to the seal like an old friend and continues looking for mussels. His casual reaction to her appearance reveals his firm belief that she would turn up. She swims closer and watches him intently. I watch from a distance and feel like an intruder. Though she could be considered my 'competition', in wanting to believe a story one weaves the visible facts together which confirm its integrity and ignores the details that undermine it: seals are curious. This may be a male seal. It may well be a different seal to

the last one Bjarni saw here which may also have been a male. But none of that matters. Here, now, they are having an encounter that transcends time and species, and swims to join all the other selkie stories that have ever been told. It is sad, and it is beautiful. But he has chosen me.

<u>*Smala og Slátur* – The Gathering and The Slaughter</u>

October 2009

The summer has been silenced. Outside the sheep house the snow is deep for miles around. Its whiteness heaps at every vertical intrusion in the landscape. The farm buildings, the smoke house, the old tractor, the plough wheel, the knife grinding stone – all are reduced to a bare suggestion in monotone, like a quick charcoal sketch. It is only at the back door of the sheep house that this pervading blankness is punctuated by a daub of deep, wild red.

It is the first week of October. We are back at Ögur, the farm where Bjarni's best-loved aunty Yrsa lives. With her husband Hallgarður, she has raised six children and many hundreds of sheep since she moved here as a young woman from the neighbouring farm, around the headland at Kálfavík. It is a week since we gathered the sheep here from the mountains, and now we are back for the slaughter. In this short time, winter has come like a full stop to a lyrical sentence.

It happened rather incidentally that Bjarni and I had been able to participate in the round-up of the flock. It was a fitting end to the road trip we had embarked upon; our end-of-summer wonderings and the bringing in of sheep both determined by a change of weather. At the beginning of the trip in early September, I had stood in a bikini in the south of the country, seeking solace in the shade of a cave. We had slept with all the doors of our campervan open that night, it was such a balmy evening. A week ago, the 27th of September, we awoke in the north of the country, outside a town called Siglufjörður. I was fully clothed in woollen underwear, helmeted in a balaclava, and had slept with my head under the duvet. I turned and drew back the makeshift curtain in a cloud of my own breath. Just when I had thought the mountains could not get any more beautiful, draped in blueberry ling and dwarf shrubs steeped in autumn colours, a dusting of snow had fallen overnight, highlighting every contour. September is a month of ambiguity it seems: it can be fine, it can be cold. Though we had lined the cavities of the van wall and ceiling with sheep's fleece from one of Bjarni's uncles a month ago, that was the first time it had felt essential.

That day, we decided to call an abrupt end to our journey and do the remaining 500 kilometres to Bjarni's parents' house in Ísafjörður in a day. He called them to let them know we were coming. It had snowed there too, they said. And when the snow comes it is time to bring in the sheep, who roam free in the mountains all summer. Every year since they can

remember, they have helped Yrsa round up her sheep to Ögur. Her farm is a two-hour drive south of Ísafjörður, so we would pass it on the way.

I had not expected to be any more than an observer at the round up, and wished I was equipped to film it. I soon realised that, with two arms and two legs, I was expected to muck in like everybody else. Though I had been nervous, as nobody seemed to think it necessary to explain the procedure, I relished the opportunity to participate in a practice the family had engaged in for generations, and upon which Icelanders had depended for food since settlement. I appreciated their apparent belief that the way to learn was simply by doing it.

Traditionally, at sheep gatherings farmers and their friends and extended families co-operate to gather sheep belonging to all the neighbouring farms. It makes sense – the sheep roam free all summer, the flocks mixing, and all but the most stubborn sheep begin to descend the mountains of their own accord as they smell winter in the air. They are gathered into a central enclosure and separated according to their ear tags.

This one was a two-day affair, and the weather on the first day was awful. The night before we started, Bjarni and I slept in the attic room of his parents' summerhouse, halfway down the fjord along which the gathering would take place. It shook with gusts of wind. The next morning, we looked out of the window with slight trepidation over steaming cups of coffee. Snow whisked at the window and the wind howled through the cracks in the house.

'This will be hard. The wind is blowing in the wrong direction,' Bjarni's mother Gyða said. 'The sheep like to have the wind in their faces.'

An advance party had gone out early. Fortunately, the news came in that the bad weather had compelled the sheep to make considerable progress down the fjord by themselves, which would make our job easier.

Our job was to drive the sheep, which belonged to all the neighbouring farms in the area, on foot down the steep and craggy-sided fjord, down to the road and around the headland to Ögur. There they would be separated out in a *réttir* – a segregated pen – according to their ear tags, to be returned to their respective farms. The team consisted of Yrsa and five of her six adult children and their families, Bjarni's mother and father, Bjarni and I, the neighbouring farmer Aðalsteinn, and some locals from Ísafjörður who rather enjoyed participating in this ritual and returned year after year. Yrsa's husband Hallgarður, who had

always been the *aðalbóndi* – the main farmer and the man who gives instructions to the gathering crew – was elderly and suffering from dementia, in the final stages of decline. He remained at the farm.

There are no sheep dogs here: the gathering is done just once a year, and it would be too costly to feed dogs for the whole year just for one weekend's work. The group formed a staggered line from the top of the mountain down to the road – the elders, women and children staying on or near the road, which had only an occasional passing car. The younger men, fit and intimate with the terrain, made their way up to the craggy heights and heathland on top of the mountain. Clapping and hooting occasionally to spur the sheep on, this line moved slowly down the fjord and throughout the day sheep began to accumulate on the road. The snow blew hard from behind us and the sun could not penetrate the clouds. Everywhere was dim. Though sheep had initiated their own head start the daylight window was short and we could not make it all the way. Cold and invigorated, we had stopped for the day near Kálfavík and gone to Ögur for *kjötsúpa* – meat soup – a reward for the helpers, made from last year's lamb.

On the second day, a generous sun reflected in the snow made the home run dazzlingly beautiful. I found it difficult to take my role seriously as I was distracted by the luminescent red of the blueberry shrubs in the low sunlight, and the blue shadows that clustered around them. I had my camera as I always did, and I wanted to stop and photograph every detail of this new landscape. Though winter had only just begun, this much snow was such a novel phenomenon to me. I could not simply walk on by. I stopped to snap off an icicle that dripped beside a stream and sucked on it. Of course, in that moment, two sheep decided to bolt back towards me. I had dropped back from the line, creating a larger gap than was ideal. As they ran towards me I had a slow-motion fantasy about grabbing one in each hand, being the heroine of the round up. Throwing down my icicle I stood ready, my limbs outstretched, my bent legs twitching wondering which way to move. The sheep bolted either side of me and were retrieved by a gatherer of much more experience.

As we neared Ögur, the sea of faces and fleeces – brown, white, black, grey – moved in a hypnotic undulation around the colourful uprights of the gathering crew. The children skipped excitedly towards the *réttir*. The bleating of six hundred sheep was cacophonous and the satisfaction of the gathering crew tangible. Another year's gathering was almost complete, and Aðalsteinn would write a poem about it, as he does every year, to be read out at Christmas. I wondered if my inexperienced antics would be immortalised. The hoots

increased in frequency and everyone was together now, on the tufty fields either side of the road. We could see the gate to Ögur. A few sheep turned up the track as they should, but the majority continued on along the road.

'The *aðalbóndi* isn't with us!' I heard someone cry. Yrsa's sons Frosti and Hallgarður junior made a sprint. Every year that this group had gathered the sheep together, it had been Hallgarður, their father, who had stood by the farm's entrance to guide the sheep in. This year he was lying in bed, trapped inside his own mind and waiting to die. The ritual was so ingrained, and everybody's place in it so implicit, that nobody had been able to imagine Hallgarður *not* being there. The sons were too late. Too many sheep had passed the entrance. Through shouted messages, and the continued forward motion I deduced that it had been agreed to press on to Aðalsteinn's farm – the next one along – where half of these sheep were destined anyway, and to segregate them there. I was relieved that even after generations of practice, mistakes could be made, and mine paled into insignificance.

After another hour of trudging along the almost carless road in the lowering light we arrived at Aðalsteinn's farm, Strandsel. The sheep were herded in to his *réttir* and separated out. A trailer was brought to literally drive Yrsa's sheep back to Ögur, where we had just come from. There was much laughter at the omission of an *aðalbóndi* replacement. I felt somehow that the hilarity masked the sadness of their recognition that this was the dwindling end of an era. Yrsa and Hallgarður's children all lived in Reykjavík and Denmark; they were not interested in being farmers. With Hallgarður's imminent demise Yrsa would not be able to keep this flock. They had been her purpose, all her life. After a few runs with the trailer packed with sheep, we returned to Ögur for coffee and cake, Bjarni and I getting a ride standing in the back of the empty wooden trailer. I looked out across the sea, my down jacket hood pulled tight around my face in the cold blue evening.

* * *

Inside the sheep are skittish. Their hooves scuff the wooden slatted floor, which is matted with a fragrant mix of hay and shit. They press against each other, penned awaiting their fate. Not to reveal it too bluntly to those beasts still alive, Bjarni and his father Haukur take a sheep out of sight to the back door of the sheep house. Haukur straddles it to the ground, points a gun at its head and shoots. He slices open its neck with a knife. Deep red blood trickles out onto the perfectly white snow. It is exquisite, and it is violent. I do not know how to feel, but I am deeply moved. For a long time, the sheep's fleecy bulk continues to

jerk beneath him. ‘It’s the death throes,’ Bjarni explains, reading the concern on my face. I am impressed and a little disturbed that he knows this expression in English. When the body finally gives in, the head is cut off and taken inside. There it is placed alongside the others, upturned, and salt is sprinkled on the open neck flesh.

The sheep’s body is brought in and placed belly up on a trough table to be worked. Gyða slices along its belly and hooks a rope to its front legs which feeds to a pulley in the roof. She moves to the other end of the rope, with Bjarni, and Bjarni’s cousin Frosti stays at the trough to grip the fleece. Mother and son heave, and Frosti pulls down. The fleece slips off like a jumper.

I was inspecting this winch a week ago, when we gathered the sheep into the sheep house. I pulled down gently on the hook, following the rope up to the ceiling. Suddenly it yanked upwards attached to my arm. Haukur was at the other end, chuckling. He embraces every opportunity to test my demeanour.

In the sheep house the thermometer reads exactly zero. It is best to be working. We all wear thermal lined overalls, or fisherman’s rubber dungarees – bright orange and impermeable. This is messy work. We fall into a neat rhythm. Bjarni and Haukur grab a sheep, kill it, carry it to the trough. Gyða sprinkles salt on its decapitated head, slices open the fleece, tugs on the rope. Yrsa hangs up the stripped carcass and slices along the length of its torso, reaching into its insides with her arms and scooping the glistening grey and pink innards into a wheelbarrow, aided by her five-year old grandson Egill.

Frosti’s wife Steinrún and I wash down the carcass with a hosepipe, and scrub at the blood spots with a brush. The carcasses accumulate on the rail, like a new line of visceral clothing in a factory. In this role my arms are mostly raised, and cold bloody water trickles under the elasticated cuffs of my overalls.

By the fifth carcass I scrub I am no longer upset when I hear the gunshot at the back door. I see it for what it is: a process in which these sheep’s lives and deaths have been overseen by the same family from start to finish. Though it is no longer ‘essential’ for survival, this gathering and slaughter connects them to something archaic, done this way since the settlement of Iceland. It is cyclical. It is a gathering of sheep and also a gathering of people in a sparsely populated land. I am going to eat this meat. I feel instrumental in the fact of my own existence and it is thrilling.

‘We love these sheep,’ Gyða had explained earlier. ‘But when they’re in this pen, they’re meat.’

They had frisked around as she bent over the railings, touching their noses affectionately and inhaling their scent. I knew that they had been given names and could see they had been well cared for.

As the snow drinks up the last of the late afternoon light, the red pool at the back door blots outwards. The sheep house fills with pink carcasses and disembodied upturned heads – the eyes fixed now on an imaginary distance, clouding over. The plucks (the conjoined form of heart, lungs and liver) are nailed to a wooden beam suspended by their tracheae to keep them clean for later processing. They are wet, pink and burgundy like grotesque tropical flowers. Each of us who has helped with the gathering, and the slaughter, will be rewarded in meat. At each meal, which will also be a gathering of people, I will know exactly the life that I am eating and will know that I have walked across the land that sustained it.

The chill of evening pries at us. The cold carcasses are slipped into heavy duty black bin bags, tied shut and loaded into a trailer.

Gos – eruption/ gas / fizzy drink

25 March 2010

It is evening. A small portion of Bjarni's extended family are gathered around the television in my 'in-laws' living room after a dinner of boiled haddock and potatoes. This tends to happen when there is something interesting to watch. The seven o'clock news tonight is going to be special.

Bjarni and I are visiting his parents over Easter. We are between lives. We have been in a long-distance relationship for more than a year, and since gathering in the sheep last Autumn we have travelled together for six months in Kenya and Spain and England on the proceeds of our stint in the mountain shop. I spent my teenage years in Kenya and my parents and grandmother still live there. Now Bjarni has met my family. I have shown him where I grew up, and where I made the film whose screening brought me to the Westfjords to start with. Neither of us currently has a home or a job. The time has come to choose where we might make a home together. Iceland? Where? England? Where? The stakes are high when you start from scratch. Or, there are no stakes at all. It depends on how you look at it. We've seen that we do adventures well, but we're not quite sure how to do normal life, or indeed what that is supposed to be.

I watch the family chatting in Icelandic, frustrated that I cannot participate. I attempt to grasp at fragments of their conversation. Certain words I know, but that is not of much use when I don't know how they relate to the other words. For now, I must bear with the paradox of being simultaneously present and absent. All of them except Bjarni's father *can* speak English, but I am the minority, and it breaks the flow to switch from their own language. Nor would I learn that way. For now, I must fathom relationships through actions and cadence. I have an urge to understand this place Bjarni comes from, the better to understand him. For the time being, he is happy to remain near his family. He has travelled more with me in six months than he has in the rest of his life. I also long to be still; to be in a situation where I can craft a life. But this is not my habitat.

As someone without intact roots, and with parents and a grandmother who live thousands of miles away, my considerations over where to be are surprisingly black and white. Many people tend to move for a job, or for someone they love. But when both people in a couple are open to being anywhere, and much of the world is in financial collapse, a different set of

concerns floats to the surface of that muddy river. The prospect of a career job is something that I might have to relinquish for a while. And besides, selling fish to tourists in the highlands thrilled me more than being a research assistant and film-maker for a national gallery. I did that work to spend time in that place. That is reward enough.

I am interested in what kind of life would be most resilient during the crisis. That involves stripping things back to identify our basic needs and where they can best be met. Thoughts echo around inside my head, pros and cons silently crashing into each other. Here, besides a landscape that blows my mind, we have the support that the extended family offers. It is a big draw, having been self-sufficient for so long. The basics would be taken care of: no shortage of free fish and lamb, cheapish rent, cheap electricity, hot springs, good woollens knitted by the family, a mechanic and joiner on hand in the form of Bjarni's father. There is a network with whom I could exchange labour, and my savings could stretch further here if I needed to use them.

These things are appealing to my overqualified self when I think of friends with PhDs who are on the dole, unable to do anything except send off more CVs and worry about not making the rent. It would also be a huge change for me; a challenging one. Eight hours' drive from Reykjavík, it is undoubtedly remote. I have no concept of what I might do here, or what my identity would be. I sense I would need to learn this new and difficult language quite well in order to figure any of that out. It would be, at the very least, an adventure. But I cannot move just yet. Soon I will leave back to the UK for the summer to shoot a film commission I have lined up. Bjarni will stay here and go shrimping on a small trawler to get some money together for the next phase, whatever that will look like.

Bjarni's father Haukur reclines with outstretched legs on the black leather sofa, covered in a woollen blanket. This is his default position. Between work, eating and chores, this is where you will invariably find him in different stages of wakefulness, in front of a TV that is almost always on, sometimes simultaneously with the radio. Bjarni and I are curled up as new lovers do, on the other sofa. Bjarni's mother Gyða is sitting in an armchair with a sated smile. She is knitting socks with four short needles at right angles, taking up a coil of *lopi* wool from the floor, while barely ever taking her eyes off the screen. Her sister Sjöfn is perched on the arm of Haukur's sofa, excitable, and as always, ready for action. Salvar, their brother, sinks into another armchair, and his Natalía sits on the floor resting her back on his legs. Salvar is consistently in awe of his landscape. Tonight is no exception.

This evening, the television is a worthy focal point. We are all enrapt and the light flickers on our wide eyes. The evening news is mostly about one thing: a recently erupted volcano on Fimmvörðuháls. Curtains of orange light spray up from inside two newly forming craters. The vents hiss and hack like a giant who has been holding his breath for millennia, breathing once again. Molten lava flows away from the centre of the eruption. The new craters are to be named Magni and Móði, after the sons of Thor – god of Thunder – as the eruption is taking place near to the spectacular glacial valley of Þórsmörk ('The Forest of Thor'). Where it cools the lava clinks off in large flakes, and volcano tourists video it with their phones and DSLRs. The flow is gentle enough that onlookers feel safe getting close, despite warnings of noxious gases.

This is my fifth trip to Ísafjörður, Bjarni's home town in the northwest, in one and a half years. I arrived here from Reykjavík this morning, with fire in my eyes. I had arrived in Iceland only yesterday evening, and yet in that short window between one flight landing and the other taking off, through serendipity I had witnessed one of the most impressive acts of nature I am likely to see. Less than twenty-four hours ago, I was standing watching this volcano in the dark with a man I barely knew.

Back in the UK, I had been staying with my volcanologist friend Paul. At his house I was privy to abnormally regular updates of the seismic activity at Fimmvörðuháls and read all the news articles, swept up in his excitement. The weather conditions had been bad for the first few days of the eruption, so it had not been possible for the media to get a true sense of it beyond seismographs. Yesterday, as I landed in Reykjavík, the weather cleared. The eruption was in the south of the country, just over two hours' drive away from the capital. I knew I needed to get there.

I remembered a man I had met while running the shop in the mountains. He was a friend of Salvar and Natalía's – an outdoor photography enthusiast and mountain rescue volunteer. I scrolled my mobile phonebook for 'Eirík'. I had him logged as 'Eirík Rescue', obviously thinking that a direct line could be useful one day.

'Hi, Eirík. It's Sarah, from the shop at Landmannalaugar.'

'Sarah! Hi! Are you back?'

'Yes, just landed. And I've heard there's something exciting going on in the south... I was

wondering if you're planning on going to see the eruption, and if I could maybe come with you?'

'Ha! I'm there now actually...taking photos. It's the first good weather there's been. Been here for a few hours.'

'Oh wow! How is it?'

'Great. Today it's the most active it's been so far. I haven't gone as close as some people are. But I could do with a break. I'll come pick you up.'

'That's a two hour drive each way Eirík! Are you *sure*?'

'Ah it's no problem. Meet you at your guesthouse at 9pm? Where are you staying?'

'Sounds great, thank you so much. I'm at Snorri's, do you know it?'

'I know it. Anyway, I'm quite sure it will be totally different once it gets dark.'

I was blown away by Eirík's generosity, but from my experience so far this seemed to be the kind of thing Icelanders do without thinking much of it. As a small nation on the edge of Europe, which has had independence only for a century, it seems that approval from outside is still important to them. Their reputation has been unfairly damaged by the financial crisis. It is emerging that the country's bankruptcy was the responsibility of a small elite of bankers, for which the rest of the country will be paying the price for many decades to come. To me, it seems that Icelanders enjoy showing people their country, and are always happy to have some fresh energy in their island days blown in by a non-judgemental Outlander. And so around nine o'clock as the light dimmed, Eirík pulled up in his jeep outside my guesthouse; happy to be giving an English woman a ride to a volcano.

Night in the south of Iceland, in Spring as in Autumn, is an actual and profound darkness. Light pollution quickly evaporates as you leave the city streetlights and bad driving. In those shoulder months, five minutes day by day, the darkness increases or decreases incrementally, caused by a rapidly disappearing sun in Autumn, and a keenly returning sun in Spring. In those months there is no snow on the ground to reflect the moonlight. Until you reach the fertile farming country of the southern lowlands, Salvar's 'Flatlands', the ground is mostly

dark lava, which wicks up any glimmers of light there may be into its suspended geology. As we descended towards the Flatlands the night was set ablaze by tunnels of orange light: geothermal greenhouses incubating tomatoes, cucumbers, and peppers for the local market. These were a brief intrusion into the darkness before the only light returned to being pools of headlights on the road and the glow of Eirík's satnav on our faces – a square of pixels meant to represent the unknown miles ahead.

Eventually we turned off route number 1. The road was tarmacked for a while, then became a dirt track – flying gravel ringing on the jeep's underside. We could see the glow from a long way off, an orange furnace suspended in the black. We got as close as we could and stopped beside a raging river. As I climbed out of the jeep, I could hear the water's force and extent, but not see it. Eirík told me it was called the *Markarfljót: markar* meaning 'a boundary marker' and *fljót*, a 'large river'.

Up above us, across the river, the silhouette of a ridge was backlit by a cloud of orange steam. The glow from the burning magma lit the steam clouds from underneath. Fountains of magma and rocks spurted from the fissure, high into the night. Hugh had told me about the tremors that led to this, their magnitudes, what caused them, which rock type was being spat out. But none of it compared to the immensity of standing under a dark-bright night, the half-moon now faintly lighting the glacier; and in the middle of it all the earth rent open, revealing its inner workings. Black and orange. Light, steam and rock. That was all there was. And beyond the rushing of the meltwater river, the faint sound of these shifting from one form into another; the sound of transformation.

I wrote in my diary this morning:

> **I was struck by a realisation of how we actually live on a ball of molten magma, a ball of *so much* light and the dark matte crust is very thin indeed. And then we cover it with all sorts of *stuff* which we convince ourselves is some sort of reality. But it is only *a* reality and, as always, the earth just has to split, or shift, and all that can come crumbling to the ground. It's important to remember that.**

'You were soooooo lucky Sarah!', Salvar exclaims with a disbelieving smile, taking his eyes momentarily off the television to look at me, and pressing his hands in front of his chest, as if to represent the right time and the right place coming together. None of the family have seen an eruption in the flesh. I have been blessed with good fortune, they tell me.

From here, 850 kilometres northwest of the activity, for the next week or so the family will glee in the footage being transmitted daily. They will admire it with a fondness, as if the volcano itself were a family member – perhaps a newborn – making a spectacular achievement. That television set will be a hearth, even more so than usual: a window onto the quintessential fire.

Over the next few days the television will show us the crowds of tourists arriving, the nation's delight in something happening here to offset the bad press surrounding Iceland's part in the financial crisis. I will learn some new words: I will hear of the chocolate bar called *Hraun* ('Lava') and all fizzy drinks, referred to as *gos* (also 'eruption'), being discounted nationwide in celebration. We will hear of some Icelandic teenagers attempting to walk on the lava and being surprised when their soles melted – blaming the quality of the shoes rather than their own stupidity.

*   *   *

Three weeks later, on the 14th of April, the eruption on Fimmvörðuháls petered out. I found out in the departure terminal of Keflavík International Airport. I was buying some duty-free Icelandic music, about to leave for England. By then I was used to asking anyone and everyone the latest on Fimmvörðuháls, in the way that both the British and the Icelanders talk about the weather – though it was implicit that this was *much* more interesting.

'Any news with Fimmvörðuháls?' I asked the shop assistant, handing over the last of my króna.

'Oh, it went out this morning. Do you have your boarding pass?'

'This morning? Amazing! It's been erupting for almost the exact length of my stay.'

'OK! But now there's another one starting. Receipt?'

'No thanks. *Another* one?'

‘Yup. Looks like Fimmvörðuháls triggered this one. They say it could be *much* bigger. You might see it from the plane! There’s an ash cloud rising.’

He handed me back my boarding pass. ‘You’re going to Britain? Sit on the left if you can.’

This other one was Eyjafjallajökull, the volcano that closed the skies and that nobody could pronounce. It was named in parodies, descending eventually to E16: a word of sixteen letters beginning with E. It is the volcano that everyone remembers because it brought with it the realisation that a natural event could bring to a screeching halt the life that we take for granted, and that nobody could ultimately be blamed. It is the one that allowed those people who still stand and look upwards to see what the sky might once have looked like before it too became busy; the loom of global air transport out of order for a while, the threads of contrails left unwoven. If they had known to break it down into its parts: *eyja – fjalla – jökull* (‘island – mountain – glacier’) they might not have found it so incomprehensible.

As I landed back in Manchester and switched on my phone at the luggage carousel, a text message came in from Bjarni:

14.04.10 13.13

Eyjafjallajökul is erupting.
2km long crack and the glacier
is melting. 4km high smoke cloud.
All my love to you xxxxxxxx

It turned out mine had been among the last international flights allowed to leave or land in Iceland for some time. Back in England the news reports featured passengers stranded at airports and departure display boards growing progressively redder with cancelled flights. People grew increasingly frustrated that their plans could be forced to change in such a way. News anchor George Alagiah reported that,

‘For the first time in British aviation history, all flights into and out of the UK have been cancelled.’

Meanwhile, Bjarni sent me links to the Icelandic media which had responded with characteristic measure to the potential emergency situation. Before the eruption had even become visible, the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management had evacuated all areas in the immediate vicinity and Red Cross Mass Care Centres had been set up across the region. Most excitingly of all, once the eruption was in full flow, video footage of shock waves rippling through the ash cloud had been captured for the first time and could be shared with me shortly after being broadcast. I imagined Bjarni and his family sitting around the television, watching this in collective delight. There would be no talk in Iceland of all the things one could not do. All there was to do was minimise the damage and pull together. I was sure then which people I wanted to live amongst. After this film was done, I *would* move to Iceland.

Flýtja – Move

October 2010

Autumn is well underway. It is almost winter. Summer was spent in England shooting footage for a film commission. Now my commitments there are wrapped up, my belongings are on a ship headed North, and I am here ahead of them. Iceland: home for the foreseeable. Me, here, now, to be with Bjarni, *is* my only commitment.

I have timed my arrival into Keflavík – Iceland's only international airport, just outside Reykjavík – to coincide with a road trip south that Bjarni and his parents are currently embarked upon. Joining them, I can wend my way North to the house that is to become our home slowly, feeling into every bend and incline. By the time we arrive, I want to feel as if I have journeyed, transitioned; somehow earned this life.

It is good to see them all, and beyond exciting to think I am doing this thing called Life with Bjarni. I embrace him, long and deep. I see Gyða and Haukur over his shoulder, standing at a discreet distance, letting us encounter one another again after two months apart, and smile. I feel part of a clan; part of a family who are woven into the land they stand on, and who can trace their ancestors back to the time of settlement. I know this land is not my own, but it is an inspiration to witness their seamlessness with it. It is something I long for, but which will always evade me by virtue of my rootlessness; my international upbringing. But I can observe and participate in *their* belonging, learn from it and reinvent its gestures when creating the shape of my own life.

Before we head north we shall go southeast. Bjarni and his parents are en route to Gíslholt in the flatlands – birthplace of Bjarni's mother. They scoop me up at the airport in their red campervan *Kroppinbakkur* – 'The Hunchback' – so named because of the domed skylight Haukur has added; 'acquired' as most of his materials are, from somewhere or other, in exchange for something or other. Hitched onto the back, a toolkit is contained in an old milk churn, painted by Salvar with a scene of a highland tarn. In the carpark of the modern glass and steel airport, we make a colourful counterpoint to the flashy four-wheel drives in shades of black and silver. We are clearly not *Reykjavíkingar*.

I slide my suitcase under the double bed in the back and Bjarni and I stow away in the bed, tucked under a woollen blanket Gyða has knitted. I am glad of the opportunity to be

horizontal: packing up to start a new life is exhausting. We have a lot of cuddling to catch up on too, and this feels like a lovely way to do it – half-asleep, carried through the landscape, entangled, and free. Haukur drives and Gyða knits, and knits, and knits, as if the world's becoming depends on it. My hands recall the still new undulations of Bjarni's body, whilst the wheels turn under us, remembering the mounds and curves of this journey they have made many, many times.

At Gíslholt, since my visit last summer, Gyða's brother Sveinn and their mother Amma Sigga have been doing what they always do: Sveinn seeing to his flock of sheep – gathering, slaughtering, tupping, lambing, grazing, making hay, gathering and slaughtering. And in between that, tinkering with the *Fjallafang* bus fleet, readying them for their summer in the mountains; running his lake fishing operation there; then bringing the buses home for the winter. Amma has been collecting clothes for the Women's Institute, saving things others are throwing out for a time her family will surely need them, knitting, making earrings, entertaining her 'boyfriend' and being matriarch. We are here to help Sveinn with the butchering of his slaughtered sheep: readying the meat that will fill his chest freezer and his family's bellies.

After sticking our heads in to Amma's kitchen to greet her, we walk straight to the outbuilding where the butchering team will be, past the hens peering at us through the window of their henhouse, into the room with the mink tails hung up on a line. Sveinn is there with his sons Einar and Jóhann, and his sister Helga and her husband and children. Finally, I meet Bjarni's cousin Hekla, named after the volcano we can see through the window. With us it makes a team of eleven, and this is only a small fraction of Amma's genetic empire.

Everyone is wearing aprons, smeared with blood: there is a production line in full swing. Some are preparing lamb shoulder, leg of lamb and lamb chops; others work the smaller strips of flesh into diced meat, or *hakk* (mince). The mincing machines are clamped to the work-surface: small strips of meat are fed in from the top, a handle is turned, and pink worms of mutton extrude from the bottom into a tub, from which handfuls are scooped into food bags, ready for freezing. The efforts of this gathering will keep an extended family in sheep meat for a year. Over the cleavers and chopping boards the siblings and the cousins exchange news and stories, and I try to make a good impression.

We break for dinner. Sveinn has a leg of lamb roasting in the oven, fresh from this year's

slaughter. Amma invites me in to rummage through the bags of donated clothes for the WI, and the rest of the team make their way to Sveinn's house next door. When I join them, the television is on and loud. Einar and Jóhann punch each other on the sofa and don't really watch it. Everyone else is in the kitchen with Sveinn, except Bjarni. I hear him laugh and find him in the conservatory in a reclining chair, reading an enormous book.

'Hey Bjarni. What are you doing?' I ask, clutching a newly acquired coat and felted woollen bag from Amma.

'Reading the phone book.'

This is a first. 'Er…why?'

'There's a *great* cartoon in it.'

He shows me, and sure enough in the corner of each page of the Icelandic phonebook, which contains the names of nearly all of the 340,000 inhabitants, there is a frame of a comic strip which runs through its entirety. Bjarni tells me it is by Hugleikur Dagsson, an artist loved for his twisted and subversive takes on contemporary society.

'He was commissioned by the phone company,' Bjarni continues.

I wish I could understand the cartoon. It's clearly hilarious. I am excited that this is what post-financial crisis Iceland looks like. It can still afford to make life fun when other places go for austerity. Not only does it seem to support artists, but also validates them. I am already proud to call myself a resident of this country.

We are called in to the kitchen and tuck in to a feast of the most delicious roast lamb. I am glad, two years since meeting Bjarni, to be able to understand some of the conversation at dinner. He has been a good teacher. I cannot contribute much but I can participate; fragments of sentences catching onto me like burrs to a woollen jumper. I hope now that I have committed to this place that the words I have in me will slot into place; that I can find a way to be myself, here, in this language. Finally, sated and tired, we head to bed. There are enough rooms and corners and pillows to accommodate all of us, of course.

We continue the butchering until Sunday afternoon, and are 'paid' for our help with various

iterations of meat to take with us. It doesn't get any less thrilling, this deal: walking away with food that has been overseen from inception to completion by the people standing around me; becoming part of this web by lending my inexperienced hands. Every time we sit down to eat it, a storyline will be traced back to this moment, and back, and back, just as it was when I first helped with the slaughter up north on Bjarni's aunty's farm.

It is time to leave; time to go and meet this new home of mine, to begin my new beginning. Amma gives us a piece of ancient but still-functional machinery she has been keeping in her basement. 'It's an electric heater for the water in our new house,' Bjarni says, loading it into *Kroppinbakkur* with his father. 'Pabbi will install it in our bathroom.' With these people everything is provided for, and money is never part of the conversation. I shall be sent off from Bjarni's extended family with food they have reared and something that will keep me warm, driven by his parents to a house they have readied for us to live in.

We shall not see Amma again until Christmas, when she will come north. Sveinn tends not to take holidays, or to travel much outside of his empire: the region around this farm (sheep) and the nearby highlands (fish). He has not been north in a long while, apparently, despite having four siblings up there. A few years ago, he drove around the whole country in twenty-four hours. It was a sponsored non-stop journey to raise funds for the construction of a swimming pool at his sons' local school. He and a friend alternated driving, sleeping, eating a huge tub of *skyr* and pissing in a bucket without ever stopping the car. 'Well, only once to take a shit,' Sveinn corrected himself. The pool is now built, but Sveinn has not taken a long car journey since. Bjarni and I will probably not see him for a while. We pile the meat and ourselves into *Kroppinbakkur*, Bjarni and I stowing away into the bed again.

We retrace our tracks to Reykjavík, then north, and north and north, headed for our new home. I think back to the first time I made this journey, just before Christmas in 2008 – totally in the dark, in every sense. As we journey I realise the route is becoming familiar. I am able to gauge the journey's progression by certain landmarks which are exactly that: marks in the land. A perfectly straight ravine. A conspicuous campus of concrete buildings in the middle of nowhere called Bifröst, after the Norse mythological rainbow bridge that stretches between Midgarð (Earth) and Ásgarð (the realm of the gods): 'a training ground for capitalists' as Bjarni calls the postgraduate university specialising in law, politics, business managment, and entrepreneurship. The stench of seawater trapped behind the causeway at Gilsfjörður, built without due consideration for the tide's breathing, which penetrates the campervan. Tungustapi – a hill said to be an elf church; and finally up and

over Steingrímsfjarðarheiði – a pass which is the portal into the Westfjords, Haukur's territory. Occasionally Gyða and Haukur call out over the engine noise to draw our attention to something: aunty Yrsa's farm, the summerhouse, the seals at the headland. Finally we spy the bright lights of Ísafjörður. It is late.

'You can just stay with us tonight if you like,' Gyða calls to us in the back. 'There's not much at your house…just a mattress, some pans, couple of chairs…like this.'

'Also breakfast materials in the fridge,' Bjarni reassures me from the pillow, blinking his eyes in his endearing way, like a cat, pleased with himself for having thought this far ahead. We prop ourselves up on our elbows now, not wanting to miss this moment – the prelude to homecoming.

I don't care that the house is almost empty. It is our home now and we have everything we need. Bjarni and I agree we want to sleep in it tonight; to arrive. So Haukur continues along the road in the darkening evening, left into the village, left up our drive and stops at the bottom of the front steps. The engine hushes at last.

The back doors of *Kroppinbakkur* open onto a world made of blue, and we are delivered. I can hardly believe this is where I live. A cobalt fjord held by indigo mountains: my new neighbours; my new view. Bjarni wraps me in the blanket from the campervan and carries my suitcase up to the front door.

Krummi – Raven (familiar)

Late October 2010

I am in my kitchen. My first breakfast in this, my own, house: bacon and fried eggs. '*Beikon'; 'Egg'* it says on their packets. Learning Icelandic should be a doddle. Outside the sky is brooding. The snow has not yet come to stay, not enough to settle and reflect, so the shortening daylight is absorbed into the dying grasses. All the images that my eyes have drunk to get here, all the miles that my body has felt under it, and the fact of being in my love's arms at last: sleep came deep. This morning I am waking up to a new life. I haven't quite caught up with what that means.

Tap tap tap.

There is a tapping sound on the roof. It is one of various sounds the house makes. It is like a chatter of it getting to know me, as I make my acquaintance with it. I will come to know these sounds well. Perhaps they will collaborate to create a soundscape that describes Home.

I cut the deep yellow yolk. It spills out onto my toast. I observe the changing light; imagine what colour the walls would like to be. They do not wish to be grey-white gloss anymore, or perhaps that is *my* wish. Soon everything outside the window will be grey-white. I know this, and I know that it will swallow me whole if I do not keep it out of my interior.

Tap tap tap.

I run my finger along the wall paper beside my chair. I feel ridges underneath. Old houses like this were panelled in wood. I'm excited that this is likely what my finger detects. A wooden house in a place with no trees! A flat pack house from Norway, erected in 1902. Is there a heavy scent of pine that has been waiting for years to breathe, trapped under the decades of wallpaper?

The radio burbles – the newsreader sounds refreshingly unperturbed. Not light hearted, not overly serious, but matter of fact. I imagine she is secure in the knowledge that most of what she is reading out will not directly affect her, or us. We are on the edge of the world.

Tap tap tap. And a scratch of claws on corrugated iron roof. I wonder what creature it is.

Bogguhús it is called, this house. 'Bogga's house'. Bogga died a few years ago, in her nineties, after spending her final years in a care home. Before that she lived in this house for *seventy* years. For someone who has never lived in one place for more than two years this fact is so profound that I cannot imagine the house ever taking on a new name. She is part of it all. She is it and it is her. Up in the loft I have discovered an indoor washing line with her wooden pegs still on it. I imagine her, well into her eighties, climbing up the steep ladder on a rainy day, a basket of damp laundry resting on her hip, when she was told she could not do this anymore.

Bogga had spent her whole married life, and beyond, climbing up and down that ladder, moving across these floors, turning these door handles. It was her husband's father who had erected this house, fresh off the ship from Norway. As a married couple they lived in it together with him and had only one daughter – unusual in this prolific nation of settlers. Bogga outlived all of them.

The primrose yellow kitchen units and faux marble formica tops are sturdy and well-kept since their installation in the 1950s. In England this might be a highly desirable 'vintage' kitchen. Here, it is just unchanged. I imagine the preparation of family meals, the arrival of Bogga's baby, the young school-age girl running out of the door to the local primary school, which is now closed. I dare to imagine having my own children here, though I feel I must find a way for this place and this house to also become 'mine', on my own terms, before it can become 'ours'. I think I will keep the yellow. It sings of Bogga.

Tap tap tap.

I finish breakfast and go to the room which will be my study. It is at the front of the house, adjacent to the kitchen and looks out onto the fjord and mountains beyond. Every so often a bright red fishing boat courses slowly across the blue grey vista. Just in front of the window, an old man walks past, as if it is his own garden. He is broad and tall, and stooped slightly forward as if towards his destiny. He wears a grey anorak, and polyester trousers with a crease down the front. The skin on his face is almost translucent under his flat cap.

'Errr...Bjarni!' I call. 'There's an old man in our garden.'

The man makes his way over to a rock by the perimeter fence and tips something onto it. Bjarni comes to look.

‘Ah that’s Ólafur. He’s our neighbour. We have a lot to thank him for, actually.’

‘Oh yeah. How come?’

‘He looked after this house for the eight years it sat empty. Kept the elements from getting the better of it. He was Bogga’s son-in-law.’

‘Aha.’

Back in April when I had returned to England after our Easter visit, and Eyjafjallajökull had erupted, Bjarni had stayed on in Iceland. We had spent a little time looking into options for houses to rent, with no luck, but we had time. I would not be able to move until the autumn anyway, and he could stay with his parents in the interim. He called me one May day and said, ‘I’ve bought a house.’ This is not how I expected to become a homeowner. Surely there are years of saving, some missed opportunities, *much* discussion, I thought. Not in this family. His mother was going to buy it ‘as a project’ because her middle name was Bogga and she liked the synchronicity. She had planned to rent it to us, but Bjarni decided we could do more with it if we owned it ourselves. It went to auction. His mother withdrew her offer. Bjarni’s was the only other. He had offered £5000.

Bjarni has been working on the house for a few months getting it ready to live in and has got to know a potted version of the house’s history in the process. I begin to sense how interconnected this community is, and how much people are rooted in it. If Ólafur is our neighbour, and was married to Bogga’s daughter, that would mean the daughter did not move more than 50 metres in her whole life.

‘Would you like to meet him?’ Bjarni asks, swinging open the door to catch him on his way back. ‘*Sæll og blessaður. Hvað segir þú*? This is my girlfriend Sarah.’

‘*Blessuð og sæl*’ he greets both of us, raising one enormous hand. ‘All moved in?’

‘Getting there. Sarah’s waiting for her boxes to arrive.’

After the obviously deducible, I have no idea what they are saying and stand there, impotent. Bjarni does not translate while he speaks, and I have begun to understand why. It breaks the flow of an already subtle dance of words and silences.

Ólafur says something and points to the rock by the fence.

'What is he saying?' I ask Bjarni.

'He's feeding Krummi.'

'Who's Krummi?'

'The raven. Apparently Bogga used to feed him every day.'

Ólafur interjects, waving a finger in warm warning.

Bjarni translates: 'He says if you forget, Krummi will come and tap on the roof to remind you.'

Ólafur laughs and curls his index finger. '*Tap tap tap.'*

He turns to face the other direction and indicates he is talking about the flagpole we have in our garden, as do many other households. I have never been a flag flyer and I am slightly embarrassed that he has decided to raise ours. It is then that I notice it is at half-mast.

'Somebody's died,' Bjarni says.

'Anyone you know?' I ask.

'Not sure. Ólafur says it's a couple. Apparently, they were on holiday in Turkey with their baby and had a car crash. Only the baby survived.'

The raven *krunks* and flies down from the roof. His wings squeak the air as he alights on the rock, where Ólafur has left a pile of bones.

I am sobered by this news. The untimely end of a new life as three. A child who will grow

up never knowing their parents. Bjarni and Ólafur stand in silence, looking out to sea. There is no rush to find out who it is. The news will arrive.

It arrives the following day through Bjarni's mother. Surprisingly I find out that *I* know the couple. Guðrún, a nature warden who worked with us during our summer in the mountains, and her man Jón. We met up with them a few months ago in Newcastle where she was studying, heavily pregnant, and she told me she was planning to move back up to Ísafjörður. When I had unpacked my boxes, I was going to call her for coffee.

The raven hops from foot to foot tugging meat off the bones in a perfect black silhouette.

<u>Bogguhús</u>

I remember the texts I received from Bjarni throughout the summer, informing me of the progress he and his parents were making on the house; snapshots of this place in another light.

> **30.07.10 18.54**
>
> **Lying on top of Bogguhús phase one**
> **of chimney repair done. Lovely weather,**
> **lovely view, love you.**

And here I am now, seeing it for the first time as our home, made habitable by their efforts. It is exciting to be with a man who knows how to fix a house, or at least who has parents who know. The chimney has been mended and cleared so we can use the wood burner – a rarity in this treeless land. We will have an endless supply of offcuts from Haukur's joinery workshop to fuel the fire. New drainage has been put in around the foundations. The ancient electrics have been made functional.

The front of the house faces the sea and mountains beyond. It looks towards Snæfjallaströnd ('snow-mountain-beach'), and beyond that to Iceland's northernmost uninhabited wilderness, Hornstrandir. Bjarni and I stand on the front step. The view from the front door is the one my mind conjured at the utterance of the words *The North,* before I found myself in it*:* a blue light, an expanse of sea caressed by rock, an openness, a clarity of air that brings distances closer and makes everything outside of this North dissolve.

Better still, Bjarni tells me, this new view of ours is protected. As a wooden kit-house imported from Norway and erected at the turn of the twentieth century, it counts as old, and the house has been assigned a minor grade of 'listed'. One stipulation is that nothing should be built in front of it. A dirt driveway unfolds from the flight of concrete steps at the front, through the grass and beyond the fence to the main street. But my attention is drawn back again and again to the sea and the mountains beyond; to the changing light; to this view that is too enormous to be called 'a view'. It is my new reality.

The front door is double. The inner one is more decorative, though sturdy and tight fitting,

with two panes of triple-glazed glass. The outer one is thicker and more functional. It is currently hooked to the stair rail of the front steps, so it isn't ripped off should a gust of strong wind come. In a few weeks I am sure we shall have to keep it mostly closed as the weather sets in. I come down the steps to ground level to explore the immediate nearby. The house stands alone in a field, encircled at the front and on one side by a low fence, and on another side by a small street at the top of a grassy bank. Ours is one of a cluster of about fifty houses which make up the village of Hnífsdalur, the oldest houses like ours lining the main street.

Though the house is rectangular and has four walls, only two sides have windows: front and back. I wonder if this is to do with prevailing winds or insulation. The windows are large at least – triple-glazed on the upper floor and single-glazed below. The basement is concrete, like the front steps.

By the back porch there is a large rock with a rope tied to it, which my eyes follow up to the new corrugated iron roof, glinting under a white sky. It appears to be holding the roof down. It makes me wonder how strong the winds will get. The walls of the upper floor are clad in corrugated iron, old and quite rusty, except for the back facade which is concrete scribbled with a tracery of cracks.

'That'll need replacing at some point,' Bjarni comments, unfazed. 'It's from the time when concrete houses suddenly became the thing to have.' He casts a glance over to the concrete bungalows that make up much of the village – the subsequent additions behind the main street.'Bogga's family tried a 'conversion' – smeared concrete *over* the iron!' He shakes his head, laughing.

Here at the back, beyond the rusting washing line, a field of dying grass carpets the way to a wooden sheep house with a corrugated iron roof. Sheep have not lived here for many years. This field is not ours and it is not protected, but it is my view from the kitchen, bedroom and bathroom. I will have two views: one 'wild' and one 'pastoral/ bungalow'. The field is about an acre. Bjarni tells me the word 'acre' comes from the Old Norse *akur* which means 'field'. Before the financial crisis, the town council planned to build four houses on this patch of land, which would have cut off our house from the sheep house that once belonged to it, like a mother from its child. I am glad of the stalling of plans.

Behind the sheep house, the miscellany of other house styles and colours that makes up this

village extends back into the glacial valley. But what I notice most are the valley's steep sides, as if the houses are toys that have slid to the bottom of a sack; and the huge boulder up there that looks as if it could topple any moment and plough into our house. Bjarni tells me it is Hádegisteinn ('Midday stone'), said to be a cork on an eternal supply of mythical ale trapped inside the mountain, accessible to the one who manages to move the rock. Somehow that makes it easier to live with.

*   *   *

It takes a week for my boxes to arrive because of an administrative hitch in Reykjavík. One morning, I look out of the living room window to see an *Eimskip* lorry reversing carefully up the drive. A short man with a boyish face and glasses jumps out of the cab.

'Ah it's my cousin!' Bjarni smiles, heading for the door.

'Who *isn't* his cousin?' I think to myself.

Cousin Pétur is invited in for coffee and chat. I marvel at what constitutes 'work' in this place: *This guy is on duty!* says the voice in my head, excited and bemused. Being a cousin, he also helps offload all the boxes. This extra help is not officially part of the service but part of being family. I suppose there will be no Icelandic boss that argues with this principle. They would be implicitly expected to do the same, at whatever level they worked. At higher levels at least, in other countries, this help would be called nepotism. We stack the boxes into one room: layered labelled cubes of black. In England, I wrapped them carefully in bin liners, naively imagining that they would be at sea for days, licked with spray, or left at ferry ports. These things are precious to me: the collected contents of a home I have not had until now. A lifetime of living and travelling in different countries and an appreciation for handmade objects has generated an ecology of storied stuff, which has been secreted in various homes, attics and garages across England. This is the first time I have ever had all of my possessions in one place. This fact hits me like wave.

The Frozen Bell

8th April 2011

I awake to the feeling that something is different. My waking has more energy to it: it does not feel like swimming upstream in treacle as it has done for months. My eyes open onto a golden light washing into my interior world, generous beyond measure. The pine-panelled walls are honey, the cane chair is freshly cut straw. The colours in my paintings sing, and the shadows have been chased out of the room. I prop myself up on my elbow in awe of the spectacle that is my backlit white curtain, the ornaments on the windowsill forming an impromptu shadow puppet theatre. I look at my clock: 8am. In my former life this would have been a leisurely time to wake up. But today this feels early, epic, right. Finally, the planet and the sun have aligned with my idea of 'normal'. The sun has moved to the east, around the mountain. I get up and look at the valley's new palette from the kitchen window. Every red and yellow thing embraces the light as if reunited with a soulmate. My dazzling red wool socks on the washing line are outrageously beautiful and full of hope. I pad around all the upstairs rooms in this new light – living room, studio, bedroom and kitchen – and photograph them like a child I know will grow up all too quickly.

I remember the morning in mid-February, when my body had told me a similar, subtler message that woke me at about 10am. It was not as obvious at first. Going to make a cup of tea, I quickly noticed that the faded red windowsill of my first-floor kitchen glowed with a yellow light. I gasped. Craning my neck over the work top I saw that one side of the back porch was also glowing. All around these two locations – these pinpricks of possibility – the landscape clung to the grayscale fug that had characterised the previous few months. Sure enough, a tentative finger of sunlight, following a very particular path and angle, was shining into my steep-sided valley for the first time since late December. Today, the whole hand has reached into the front of the house and grasped me.

In the nearby town of Ísafjörður, sprawling as it does across a spit in a wide fjord, the sun retouched the residents in late January after an absence of only a month or so. There is a street on the west side of the fjord called Sólgata – 'Sun Street'. As well as being the way into town from my village, it acts as a geographical sundial. When the sun casts its first rays upon it following its annual absence, the town's households celebrate *sólarkaffi* ('Sun Coffee') by eating pancakes filled with whipped cream and blueberry jam, with coffee. There

seems to be a jam maker in each household whose early September days are filled with preparing and storing the bucket-loads of blueberries, bilberries and crowberries they and their families have gathered from the surrounding mountainsides, which at that time were steeped red and yellow by the bushes' dying leaves. The berries themselves are intense: sweet, blue-black embodiments of the summer's light, which have kept us in vitamins and vitality through the winter. Boiled and sweetened into cordial, boiled and sweetened for longer into jam, and frozen whole to be eaten with *skyr* and cream.

Bjarni's parents live in Ísafjörður. Gyða invited us round for pancakes the day the sun returned to them, and I wondered how long it would be before we were making our own. Hnífsdalur, the name both of the valley where our village lies, and of the village itself, means 'Valley of the Knife'. Though it is only four kilometres away from my in-laws' house, it is the other side of the 'knife': a steep mountain topped by a sharp-edged arête. In this northern fortress of the Westfjords which, in the winter at least, seems to keep the world and everything I have taken for granted at bay, this mountain feels like the final line of defence. Our house faces northeast and we are cupped in this valley by the mountains to the south, north and west. Our neighbour Ólafur has lived here for sixty years – a hefty share of winters. In January, after Gyða's pancakes, I'd asked him when the sun would return to us. 'April'. I thought he was teasing me. It turns out he was not. But here we are. At last, Hnífsdalur has been sliced like butter from the darkness.

When I first conceived of moving here I had believed there would be a brief period of midwinter where the sun wouldn't shine at all; where it would be pitch-black day and night. I was curious about what that would feel like or what that would do to me. Arctic winter was a concept, the nature of which I did not yet understand. But when I first conceived of moving here, I had thought of it as an experiment, an adventure. Maybe I'd stay for a year, then see how I felt about this place, and about Bjarni.

Bjarni's impulsive decision to buy us a house had changed all that. We had looked for houses to rent when I was visiting at Easter and had put our names on the town council's renter list. It is true that nothing had come up yet. But I was not expecting this. One day, there it was: Bogguhús. It came on the market and we needed a house. It had been empty for years. It was unbelievably cheap and needed a fair amount of work. Bjarni's parents had enough experience of renovating houses to make it liveable. This was the 'easy' option. So, between them they created a place where we could live.

I am moved by the collective momentum for our togetherness. And I am learning that Bjarni does what appears to be the most straightforward thing at the time. He does not necessarily think through the implications. Perhaps when one operates like that there are no implications; one is dealing only with a continuum of present needs. Admittedly, I have craved a home to call my own for as long as I can remember. So, while my rational mind was shocked and subsequently enthralled to become a home owner in such a way, my body filled out into the space almost as soon as I arrived. I wanted to get to know its textures and surfaces to see what we might make together. It would be my world and my work, so I threw myself into it. I cannot see a home in which I can do whatever I wish as a temporary arrangement. It is a gift that has come in strange and beautiful packaging.

This house I now stand in has involuntarily shifted my perspective on how long this particular adventure may last, and how I approach its daily phenomena. With every challenge – the absence of light being the most significant – I find myself experiencing it not as an abstract point of interest but as something I will have to live with, to make a life inside of. I cannot observe and retreat to a familiar elsewhere. I have not come here under the auspices of research. I have come for love – for a landscape and for a man and his family. And now, growing each day, love for a house. This has become my life.

My experience of the light's absence has been less intense than total darkness would have been, but more protracted. I wish I had it in me to keep a record of the times of sunrise and sunset; there is poetry in such accuracy. But this being my life, I feel it as a whole reality; not a set of data to be recorded and analysed. I know that when I first arrived in October the days were tangibly short, and that up until the winter Solstice, every few days they shortened to a degree that in England would have signalled a seasonal shift. I have felt as if I am constantly running to adapt to a new reality. Each day the darkness has nibbled further into what I consider possible. Underneath all of this, like shifting magma, I am adapting to a new reality of a magnitude much greater than the changing light.

A snow-blanketed worldview has been a constant from early October. Occasionally it has been warm enough on several consecutive days for the whiteness to recede in patches and reveal the flattened, deadening grass underneath. Soon enough the snow falls again, until it is too deep to concede to earth. In those first few months of winter, as the days shortened quickly, the snow was blinding. Sunglasses were essential for driving. As the sun hit the snow directly from an ever-decreasing angle, the ground glittered. The ice crystals reflected the light in all directions.

They reflected the heat too. I remember one morning coming into my kitchen, like today, to make tea. Some windows were open: the Icelandic way is to have the heating on and the windows open a touch, to keep the air circulating. The roof was thick with snow and the light bounced from the ground through our tall windows into the kitchen. I was hot in my pyjamas. I turned off the heating. I was still too hot. I stripped. I could not comprehend how thick snow could make me so warm, but it is both an insulator and a reflector – one of many paradoxes that are becoming my reality.

One of the first things I did was to paint the walls of the living room and bedroom a shade of ivory white, covering the grey white that they had been. I have not seen enough of the light's behaviour to choose a colour that might have an ongoing conversation with it in all weathers. So I stuck to a white that had warmth in it. Each daub of new paint drank up the light there was, glowed with it, and threw the layer beneath into shadow. I have noticed Bjarni is reluctant to make changes to the house until I begin. Then he joins in and delights in how it can change the atmosphere. As the light began to dwindle I was eager to quickly obliterate any shades of grey, of which there were many. At the point of last decorating, the previous inhabitant, Bogga, must have acquired a large vat of grey ship's paint, which made it onto every skirting board and halfway up the bathroom wall. Its dullness breathed into every room, and I have retaliated with my colourful possessions.

From early December the direct light became a rarity. Any light there was, was hosted by the snow; the meagre offering received graciously and shared. On clear days the sky could still be blue or pink or both; the angle of light was lowering but transcendental. The last smudges of yellow and pink light began to evaporate from the white canvass of my terrain – first in the nearby and then from the distant mountains too. In the bowl of the glacial valley in which our house sits, the shadow slowly crept up the mountainside like a pair of dark diaphanous trousers being lifted to the waist. For a short time, the light still kissed the mountaintops daily and we could remember what it looked like.

My French friend Sophie came to visit in early December. She had just finished her PhD and was curious about how the Arctic winter might overwhelm her over-exercised rational mind. She brought five novels to read in a week, thinking we would be largely house-bound, and there would be both the time and motivation for such literary indulgence. One day, in the brief window of daylight, we drove to the supermarket at the bottom of the fjord. Some light still shone on the distant mountains, but we were bathed in shadow. There the sea water

mixes with fresh water flowing in from a stream. We saw that the fjord had frozen over at that point, less saline. Dark basalt rocks poked up through the leathery ice layer, which had peeled back from around them, like the eggs of a large boreal bird hatching. The brackish water had frozen quickly in layered stages. It was solid but not thick. We stepped out onto it and broke panes of ice over our heads because it was fun. We skimmed ice fragments across the glassy surface, which continued unhindered for 200 metres and halted in the white distance like full stops on an empty page. Then we turned our gaze downward to the ice layer itself. There, growing either side of cracks in the surface were delicate bristles of white ice crystals, fine as a toothbrush; bubbles of air trapped within the ice on their way up, each moment flattened and separated into stacks of coins. We were there an hour, maybe two. Sophie did not do much reading that week.

When the sun finally dropped below the horizon, I had no precedent for such a disappearance. I did not feel as much in that moment, as in the gradual dawning of the fact that it would not return for a long time. At about the same time that the natural light disappeared, it was replaced by the illumination of Christmas lights around every profile upon which it was possible to hang them – the squares and rectangles of house windows, the masts of boats in the harbour, the wheels and cabs of tractors parked at farms, and the crosses in the graveyards.

'Shall we go see the graveyard?!' Bjarni and his sister had suggested, in the run up to Christmas. I had thought it a strange idea, but was infected by their excitement, and was open to going along with strange ideas. They took me to the Ísafjörður cemetery, the largest in the Westfjords. It could have been 4 pm or 10 pm, one as dark as the other. But as we rounded the top of the fjord, a sea of cross-shaped, flashing, multi-coloured lights unfolded in front of me. The graveyard felt alive and festive; more like a Las Vegas graveyard theme park than a place of rest. I was touched at how the dead seemed to be not just remembered but involved in the festivities. It was like nothing I had ever seen. It seemed uncharacteristically bawdy, but I could not explain why.

On New Year's Eve, every village has an enormous bonfire, and fireworks are set off with abandon. In the weeks running up to it, Hnífsdalur village hall was transformed into a firework supermarket, complete with shopping trolleys and cashiers. The fireworks are sold by the *Björgunarsveit* – the volunteer-led mountain rescue service – to raise the majority of their funds for the year. In charitable spirit, people support them by spending around £300 per household on fireworks. Some of the fireworks are named after heroes and villains from

the sagas. This winter, two years since the explosion of the financial crisis, I noticed a few boxes had been rebranded: no longer named Njál or Eiríkur but 'The Bankers', a sticky label placed over the old name.

By January, that kiss of pink on the mountaintops too had disappeared. I ceased to have a shadow. Everywhere *was* a shadow. And quite unexpectedly, Bjarni went to sea. Though it was cheap, Bjarni had borrowed money to buy the house from his parents, and he is averse to being in debt. When we set up home in October, he had started a 10-5 job as manager of a friend's magic shop. It suited him: his rotund and bearded figure lorded over the jars of herbs and crystals like a wizard, and he was known in the town for his knowledge and courtesy towards customers. Best of all, he was home by 5.10, which I didn't realise at the time was a luxury. His friend, the shop owner, wanted to keep the shop running through Christmas and the sales, then close it down. It was one project too many in her catalogue of life projects, and somebody in the east had offered to buy all the stock.

Come January, Bjarni was out of work. I was occupied editing the documentary I had shot in England during the summer, and could support myself off the proceeds. He went to buy milk one evening. A trawler captain had been standing next to him in the queue at the supermarket. He knew Bjarni was from a good family. Up here this is enough of a basis for offering work, it seems, regardless of experience or qualifications.

'Have you got a job Bjarni?'

'No'. Bjarni always answers questions directly, and literally.

'Are you looking for one?'.

'Yes'.

Though I tried to temper my objections with an open mind, the anthropologist in me saying, 'This is part of Icelandic life. Stay curious', dread loomed beside my heart. This is not what I came for. I came to live with him, not without him. Since joining the trawler crew, he has been allowed to come home irregularly, for a few days, or a few hours – mostly when the weather is too bad to fish. In the moments he is home, I feel I have to pack all of life into them – getting him to help with things I could not manage, sharing stories I have not been able to tell – then grow increasingly anxious that he is about to leave again. My memories

of those moments feel more intense than the long unravelling hours of the winter that I have faced daily. They are like looking at holiday photos weeks after returning to normal life. But being mostly alone with this winter has allowed me to face this place as I might have faced him, had he been here. To encounter the joys and struggles of a new relationship with unfamiliar terrain. I have found love in unexpected places.

At the hardest time in January and February, the dawn starts at 11am and the day is over by 3pm. In between, the world is washed over by a diffuse grey light, like an underexposed black and white photograph. That time and that colour has merged into the present moment, with infinitesimal increases in energy drip feeding into me. Mostly, I am sluggish and feel abandoned by civilisation. I am just surviving. In this time of shadowed sub-zero there has been nothing to do but turn inwards. At least it is dry, and often still, as if we are suspended in the long moment between the year's inhale and exhale. On these still days, people hang laundry outside on the line. I follow suit and bring in jeans and shirts that are flat and stiff as a cardboard cut-out.

What I know is that it has felt like a thick fog through which I have waded. Some days it has been hard to climb the stairs, or to remember what my ideas were. I have clung to a surety that I do have some inside of me. The feeling of winter has been so physical. I have found my mind to be a muscle of which I must manage my expectations, given the conditions. I have attended a yoga class since January which has saved me, rationalising that a physical imposition can be balanced out by a physical response. In doing so I have learned that the word for 'spirit' (*andi*) and 'to breathe' (*anda*) has the same root in Icelandic. *Beygja* – bend. *Djúp* – deep. *Halda* – hold.

Each day, in the narrow window of daylight, I walk the valley in all weathers except gales. I have hoped that by doing this it might slowly start to feel 'mine'; that the valley and I may begin a dialogue of belonging. It has not started yet, but nobody has seemed to be very talkative in winter. The mountains, too, keep their secrets close under their snow blankets. This physical activity has at least kept my mind supple enough to have patience for the unlocking that the return of the light must surely bring.

The disappearance of direct light makes you look not to the horizon, but to the ground beneath your feet. Ice forms fat fingers around blades of grass. Streams freeze, are covered in snow, and occasionally gurgle invisibly underneath it all. The basalt mountains are invaded by ice which pries its fingers deep into their fissures and encrusts their cliffs with

icicles sometimes a metre tall.

But it is the minutiae of ice's work that captivates me. On cold nights Bjarni's workshop window, single glazed, is a canvass for a most delicate patterning of ice which Icelanders call *frost-rósir* – 'ice roses'. Crystals form into quills and replicate themselves across the windowpane like a translucent feather bed. In England, I have occasionally seen this on car windscreens. But I have never experienced the wonder of being able to stand with my eyes close to it, the crystals like a glass engraving backlit by a blue that only the Arctic knows.

I photograph it in great detail. Later, one of these 'ice rose' photographs will be one of a selection that I shall sell at craft fairs. At one, an old Icelandic lady will choose this print out of all of them and hold it for a long time, silent with rue. 'Just beautiful,' she will whisper in English for me, pronouncing the final 'l' as 'tll' like a tear falling on ice. 'I used to love these *frost-rósir* when I was a child. We don't get them anymore with all this...*triple* glazing.' I will be heartened that my intrigue is matched by an Icelander, though the act of paying close and slow attention seems to be largely the preserve of the older generation, much like anywhere else.

When the weather is not still, it is fearsome. All garden furniture and trampolines were tied down at the beginning of winter as a matter of course. Our wheelie bin blew into the sea when the bin men neglected to chain it back to the fence. The wood of the house creaks and groans in these storms. I keep telling myself it is a good thing if its wooden structure dances and adapts. *Beygja* – bend. *Djúp* – deep. *Halda* – hold. It has been here long enough to know what life may throw at it, though I cannot abate the fear that a large object may blow in through the window. On these nights I lie awake, clutching the hem of my duvet and hoping. On these days I feel like a trapped animal. I do not even want to venture into the garden, let alone attempt a conversation with the valley. I wonder if I am weak of spirit when, from my window, I see a man walking backwards in a blizzard, his back braced against the wind. But yes, I have found love in unexpected places.

I have witnessed the majesty of *glitský* – Nacreous clouds: pearlescent wisps the colour of an illuminated oil patch and the weight of a passing idea, they appear just before sunrise or after sunset. Their height in the lower stratosphere means that they dazzle in the low-angled light, backdropped by the surrounding dim.

At night a different energy takes hold of me. I am energised by the darkness: it is not heavy.

It crackles, and the sky feels infinitely high. On clear nights, when the moon is full, it has seemed as if it is brighter than the day. One night I sat out on the front step reading by moonlight, just because I could. Often, I am reading a book or working on my film until 2am, knowing I need to ride an energy wave whenever it exists, all previous schedules abandoned. I will look out of the window or stand at the threshold before bed, breathing the night in. On some nights the faint green glow of the aurora borealis begins to bloom out of the darkness, pulsing and growing until the only thing to do is put on my coat and boots and head out into the valley. Its curling mantle redefines dimensions of space; smudges out the line between the real and the mythic. To walk alone in the middle of the night with the hushed crunch of my footsteps in a green-lit bowl of snow: that is what I came for. That is what living is for.

The only difference between those long weeks and yesterday is that the distant light and colours have returned. There is no growth by which to measure the year's progress. The difference between yesterday and today is like the difference between night and day itself. The light has returned to the Westfjords, to the far mountains, to my valley, to my house and to me; and with it, life will begin to awake.

Bjarni will be home today. As always, I do not know for how long. But the weather is still and bright at the same moment that we shall be together. It is a rare constellation of phenology and circumstance and I am delighted. I can show him what I have been doing with the house, in this new light. We can go for a walk together in the sun; to explore our nearby, to linger. I will see if the mountains have anything to say when he is with me.

* * *

We head not up the valley, as I most often do, but towards the shore. That is where the sun is, and where Bjarni enjoys poking around in rock pools. Bjarni decides to take his bicycle and circles around me, chatting happily as I amble from our track onto the street. As soon as I set foot onto the untouched white snow layer of pavement I see my shadow for the first time in months. I had forgotten that a shadow could exist as distinct entity. As I walk along the street I watch, bemused at this companion who moves like I do; who now seems like a version of me that existed until today – not fully here, but stretched out and deep blue. Finally, it is peeling away, and I have come back into my body.

The cemetery is on the way down to the shore: four turquoise concrete walls enclosing the deceased in right angles. We are stopped in our tracks. At the gate to the cemetery hangs a brass bell, rung when a burial is taking place. The gate is called the *sáluhlið* – the gate of the soul – and the bell tolls from the moment the coffin enters the graveyard until it touches the bottom of the grave. A little way off to the right of the gate is a standpipe for visitors to use, to tend to plants in summer. At a moment which nobody witnessed, this standpipe began to leak. The water leaked through a crack so tiny that a jet was forced in an arc across the gate which landed on the bell. It continued to arc and land and arc and land as the temperature fluctuated around zero. Over days and nights this arc has frozen and dripped. Now the bell is draped in a jagged skirt of icicles, unmoving and un-chimeable. And an arc that should be a motion, a moment, is held still as a solid object.

A frozen bell. Like living without your partner, or snow that makes you hot. Something which shouldn't be and yet it is. It seems not to fulfil its purpose, but becomes instead something beautiful and unexpected which only a peculiar constellation of circumstances could have created. This frozen bell is a constellation more unlikely even than our being here, together, as the sun returns. Only our awed silence communicates how privileged we feel to witness such an exquisite paradox.

The Possibilities Are Endless

It is a most unlikely house move. One that only people like you and Haukur would think to do. It is an image of caution thrown to the wind, dreams indulged; and whatever happens in the next few hours will make a story that will be told for many years to come. I still tell it now, though the orange digits in the bottom right hand corner read 26.7.94.

In the centre, looming large, is a juxtaposition I have never seen, and may never see again: a pitched-roofed corrugated iron-clad house, flanked on one side by empty red and yellow oil barrels, sitting in the shallows of a bay. Behind it, across the water, a mountain slopes straight from the sea. Patches of green vegetation cling on to the sandy coloured rock: the slope looks worn like threadbare corduroys. At its top the mountain becomes a dark grey basalt terrace, still streaked with the white of last winter's snow. There it meets the grey-white of the clouds overhead, which float across a deep turquoise sky, casting spots of sunlight to dance on the mountain.

In the foreground you walk across the frame, clad in orange overalls, your thick brown hair scraped back in a ponytail ready for action. You are removing a work glove to take up your camera. You smile fully at someone out of frame – perhaps one of the many friends and family who have gathered to participate in this adventure. It is a smile that reveals both your shyness and your pride. You know this is a special moment indeed, and that days like these make you glad to be alive. The sun is shining, and the water is still; so still that the house is reflected perfectly in it, until the mirror fragments into a dark sea-weedy shore. You could not have asked for more, and everybody knows it. It is a perfect Arctic summer's day.

At the back corner of the house, black welly-booted and calf-deep in the water, Haukur is clad in matching overalls and is bent over fastening one of the floating oil barrels to the house. Another man, your sister's husband, in blue trousers and a chequered shirt, saunters through the water just behind him, his hands in his pockets as if out for a stroll. His gaze is cast on the back of the house. Perhaps he is judging how many barrels you will need on that side.

Peering out of the decorative upstairs window at the gable end is your twelve-year-old daughter Súla, squinting into the bright sun with her toothy grin – her head framed by the top window and her body by the bottom. Right beside her, similarly dissected by the window

frame stands her closely aged cousin Funi, who has already mastered his nonplussed expression so young. Their heads rest on their fingertips, which pinch the window in a gesture of uncertainty and excitement. The top two panes of glass are missing, allowing them to feel the play of the sun's warmth and the cool of the glacial breeze on their faces; to smell the salty sea. They look to the photographer seeking reassurance. Who could it be?

The white corrugated iron roof is peeling off on the left side, like birch bark, and slightly rusting. At the top of the roof, a ladder emerges out of a hole, on which your niece is standing confident and care-free, resting her elbow on the ridge. Behind her, sitting at the highest point and looking down towards the sea, is your teenage son. The boy Bjarni who would become a man who would become my husband. He is red-faced and focussed. He is torn between enjoying this moment and letting his fear of still water get the better of him. He is as far from it as he can get. He does not know in this moment how much that drowning incident at summer camp will affect him.

Though you leave your children to take care of themselves, what you are about to do is one of the most inspiring and formative acts of parenting you could hope to offer: to show them, not tell them, that the possibilities are endless.

Behind you and behind the fluorescent digits in the bottom right hand corner, bathed in sunlight yet concealed somehow by shadow, is a boy. He holds his arms behind his back and looks up at the other children. He wants to join them, but he is shy. He is not as close as your children and your sister's children are, born within months of each other. All the children understand that floating a house is a particularly special and fun thing to do. But they do not yet realise how rare in this world is the imagination and courage required to pull it off.

Soon, when all the barrels are attached, you will all sit on the shore and wait for the tide to rise, to lift the house from the ground so that you may tow it with Arngeir's boat, to the place two fjords from here where your Haukur was born, to the patch of land he has inherited. There, you and your kin will work hard to make it a liveable and beautiful summerhouse. You shall spend many happy summers there, avoiding the world, listening to the eiders and hiking to the top of the mountain. Tending to your vegetable garden by day and knitting by bright night. Haukur will repair an ever-growing collection of rowboats, and occasionally chase seals in one of them. In the evening he will read the old Icelandic stories out loud to whoever will listen. Your extended family will descend from all around the country at the end of August each year to pick the thousands of bilberries, blueberries and crowberries that

thrive on that land, which will carry you all through the winter.

One day your son will bring me there, and I will fall in love with him, with this house, this tale, and this land, like I have no other. One day over dinner I will ask you, ‘Did you never worry it would sink?’ You will reply, ‘Yes, but wouldn’t it also look beautiful at the bottom of the sea?’

Trúlofuð – Engagement (*trú* – belief; *lofa* – to vow)

April 2011

My grandmother turns ninety at the end of May.

'I don't want to be ninety,' she told Bjarni and I when we visited her in Kenya a couple of years ago. 'It's too much.'

But Life has other plans, and soon it is time to start travelling south, and south, and south, to be with her for her birthday party. This is the first time since moving up here that I will connect present life with past, in one journey. Arctic to Equator: lines of latitude inscribed on a globe, to which storylines pay no heed. Poised at the edge of departure it feels like an epic journey. My home up here is an unlikely trajectory for my life to have taken. I am sure my parents felt the same when they moved from England to Kenya when I was a child. But they chose that path. I feel like mine chose me.

It feels strange to leave *now*, crossing paths with birds migrating northwards. Bjarni's winter fishing tours are over so he will be home much more, which I have longed for. The light has recently returned and I feel creative, generative; like my ideas have started to thaw and I need to catch their drips into some container before they evaporate or seep underground. As tough as the winter was, it bedded me in, and made Elsewhere dissolve. I want to be around to witness this birth of life. I have vegetable seedlings germinating. Bjarni has built shelves into the windows in the bathroom, pantry, bedroom and kitchen so we can make use of all the light there is. I have never had a garden before, let alone a garden in the Arctic. Gyða has given me armfuls of yoghurt pots from the canteen at the school where she works, to use as plant pots. I have no idea how many seedlings is too much, so I just fill the window shelves. As I prepare to leave, I watch each day for the circle of deep brown compost to break into green.

Bjarni wants to drive with me as far as Reykjavík. He will not be coming to Kenya this time. We spent three months with my grandmother that first trip, and they made friends and made peace with the fact they may not meet again. Bjarni wants to use his land-based time to see to the house: the roof needs changing for a start, and we need to take advantage of the short window of summer. I feel bad leaving him to it, but his parents will help. It is an eight-hour

drive to the capital if you go directly via the coastal route. But we decide to make a holiday of the road trip south and take the mountain and ferry route across the bay of Breiðafjörður; spend a couple of days over it and visit the island of Flatey – the only inhabited island in the archipelago.

‘You’re going to love Flatey,’ Bjarni beams. ‘It’s really special.’

Apparently, it is about two kilometres long by a kilometre wide. It’s a haven for those birds travelling northwards. There are no cars and only two families live on it all year round. Many more turn up in June to occupy their summer houses and it buzzes with the kind of life that belongs to another era – slow-paced and convivial. We’ll be there a few weeks before the summer mode begins: just us, the two families and the arriving birds. One of the families operates their home as a guesthouse and we make a booking: it’s still too cold for camping.

Making a ferry booking is less straightforward. Until early June, the ferry runs on the winter schedule – that much we know. This means it is not daily and does not always stop at Flatey: two families do not need such connectivity. I would not be surprised if they have some code, like lighting a flare, if they need the ferry to stop by. But we cannot find information online about when it does run. A call to the ferry company is required, and I’m pleased I can make this call as they’ll speak English. Over the winter I felt impotent, not always being able to participate in the functioning of my own existence.

‘Hi, we’d like to take the ferry south in a couple of weeks. Can we travel to Flatey on 5th May then get picked up the next day to go to Stykkishólmur?’

‘Actually, I don’t know.’ There is a pause long enough to suggest this is all the ferry company employee is going to say.

‘Right. Is there somebody who will know?’

‘I can ask.’

‘Thank you. You’ll find out and get back to me then?’

‘I’ll do that.’ She doesn’t ask for my number.

‘The number’s 4163427.’

When I can communicate, I am always surprised at how I have to ask for everything; to know exactly what to ask. Sometimes I even have to give the answer to a question that I should have been asked, but have not been, just so the issue might move forward. Answers are often brief and literal: I’ve noticed this in Bjarni too. Unless there is an urgent need, an impulse to find solutions, if it exists at all, is not explicit. I have a feeling I am missing something.

A couple of weeks later we’re due to start driving south and still don’t know if we’re able to take the ferry. Elín, the woman at the ferry office, never did call back. Bjarni tries this time.

‘Hallo Elín? Did you find out about the ferry stopping at Flatey for us? My girlfriend called you a while ago.’

‘Oh yes! Sorry I completely forgot. I’ll call you right back.’

She doesn’t. We tune in to the radio to listen to the weather forecast to at least gauge the likelihood of the ferry running. The news comes on first and is largely dedicated to the royal wedding of Prince William to Kate Middleton.

Later, Bjarni tries again. ‘Elín. What’s the news?’

‘Oi, sorry! I’ve been watching the royal wedding *all day*! So beautiful! Is your girlfriend English?’

‘Yes, she is. So, can we take the ferry?’

‘Wow. She must be so proud! Yep, all fine with the ferry. Be at Brjánslækur 5.45 tomorrow evening.’

‘Takk.’

I can tell from his smile that Bjarni is amused by Elín’s audacious honesty, and at the stark contrast in our levels of interest in the royal wedding. He is much more accustomed than I am to what ‘a job’ here can entail – any low responsibility desk job being an opportunity to

spend much of one’s time on Facebook. I am utterly confused at how businesses survive and Bjarni cannot enlighten me. He has not been forced to think about it before. No wonder Bjarni’s parents don’t seem to consider what I do to be work: I sit at a computer. They are of farming stock and only when you are doing something with your body that has an immediately visible outcome do they seem to register it as work. Despite the fact that I have been editing a documentary over the winter for a British university, for which I have been paid more than Gyða will make in a year, it is only when I did a week’s cover last month washing up in her school kitchen that she visibly relaxed, satisfied that I was capable of work.

‘That’s nice. We have the day to travel there slowly,’ Bjarni says. ‘The ferry’s not ‘til evening. It’ll be beautiful through the mountains. Forecast’s good.’

‘It’d be nice to have a fire down on the beach when we get there.’

‘Good plan. Let’s take some wood.’

We always have to travel with firewood – a small bag of offcuts from Haukur’s joinery workshop. There just aren’t any mature trees. Once upon a time this was a forested island, but the settlers did a thorough job of cutting down almost all of the trees: to make charcoal for smelting, for tool handles, for boats, and to clear the land for sheep grazing. Using any wood from the small patches of woodland that do exist would feel sacrilegious: the ‘forests’ are so embryonic. No visitor to Iceland will escape the joke: ‘What do you do if you get lost in an Icelandic forest? Stand up.’ I notice the absence of leaves rustling particularly now that Spring is here. In winter the silence was more expected. Now I anticipate the sound of vegetation, but the trees and shrubs are small and low, silent, hunkering down out of the wind.

I have tried to persuade Bjarni that we should plant trees around the house as a wind-break, to create a micro climate for other things to grow.

‘It’ll spoil the view,’ was his response.

‘The trees *are* the view!’

We are clearly not going to agree on this. I’ve noticed that a feeling of spaciousness and an

ability to see far into the distance seems to be considered almost a citizen's right: to see weather coming, or visitors coming; to be able to respond spontaneously, to feel free. Many people seem under the impression – bodily if not intellectually – that the way they see a landscape is the way it has always been. No Icelander on this island has lived through a time where verticals stood close together, be they human or tree. Nor is such a time part of a cultural memory: no stories I have heard are mossed and wooded. A long view in the landscape does not necessarily equate to a long view in approach to life. But perhaps this is an effect of rapidly changing weathers, and the fact that the ground we stand on is moving, forming, eroding. Too much planning is futile.

'I'll go and get some beers too,' I say, heading out of the door.

I go to the tiny *Vínbuð* – the 'wine shop' – a state-owned alcohol franchise. It is the only shop that can legally sell alcohol and there are three of them in the whole of the Westfjords. Three for three thousand people. It's still early so I miss the rush, thank goodness. Hoards usually descend just before it closes at 6pm. When Icelanders are forced into small spaces their spatial cultural legacy does not appear to serve them well; a morass of bodies trying at once to be free and not to impinge on others. I arrive to find that for the first time the *Vínbuð* has real cider. Previously it only stocked sickly sweet Swedish ciders. But here it is: dry Somerset cider – my favourite tipple from England. Knowing I will soon be able to taste this makes my longing for mature trees more acute: trees hanging in fruit, orchards, the smell of woods and the incremental measure of time by the leaves' unfurling, browning, and falling.

Making a life here these past months, I have enjoyed the way that the general lack of choice of food and drink up north has made me more resourceful, and more grateful for things when they come. It reminds me of when I moved to Kenya aged eleven, and I believed I had to accept that I would never see a jam doughnut again, though mum would have marmite sent out. Instead I got to discover things like *mkate wa tambi* – a Swahili spaghetti cake, baked with coconut milk and cardamom. When we do go to Reykjavík and have the possibility to stock up on almost anything, I have no desire for it. I have come to appreciate what is here.

Thanks to my adopted family, I have discovered all the things you can prepare with a sheep, from the delicious *hangikjöt* (smoked lamb), through the perfectly palatable *kæfa* (a fatty mutton paté) to the more challenging *pungur* (singed, boiled ram's testicles) and the shocking to look at but surprisingly edible *svið* (singed, boiled half sheep's head – the 'best' ones with the eye still in the socket). And Bjarni has come home from every fishing tour

with a bin liner of fish: monkfish, cod, halibut, coley. Once, he came back holding a ten-litre bucket of lumpfish caviar that was going to be thrown overboard as the lumpfish was not part of the fishing quota. We went around the whole village door to door offering it to neighbours as it doesn't keep for long.

But I have missed cider. As strange as it may sound if you are not party to the bigger picture, I am convinced that its availability here will significantly improve my quality of life: I can drink my trees, even if I cannot grow them quickly. I buy two crates in case this is the last delivery for a while. The manager insists I can make an order for more if it's not on the shelves, but I am beginning to learn what promises mean here. They are intentions, implicitly tempered by a host of variables which remain beyond the control of the intender.

* * *

We wake early to a pink-skied morning. We are approaching the time of year when the sun does not set. The sea is still, and we are excited to be spending a few days together, going somewhere new. It is warm by Icelandic standards: ten degrees perhaps, and is due to get warmer later. My bag for the two-day Iceland leg of the trip is much bigger than my three weeks of Kenya luggage. Iceland bag: Icelandic jumper, thermal leggings, hat, gloves, wellies, cider, firewood. Plus another waterproof kit bag with a load of film making gear: I am learning that you just never know what is going to happen, or when, so better to always have it with me, even if I'm not sure what film I am making yet. Kenya bag: vest tops x3, skirt, birthday present, swimming costume, sarong, flip flops, passport, vaccination log book. I sling them onto the campervan bed and we climb into *Maríubjalla* – 'Ladybird' – our red and black Toyota Hiyace. We have not done this since our road trip around the country in 2009, and we are both at our most content on journeys like this – free, continually improvising. But it is hard to leave my home, and my plant pots in the windows, and the roof that needs fixing.

We wend our way on empty roads towards the blue mountains, and after forty minutes the tarmac ends and we reach gravel track. It snakes steeply uphill to a pass where suddenly we are driving alongside a bank of compacted snow five metres high. The road-clearing trucks have carved right into it like a knife through thick icing on a cake. This snow never completely melts: the depth just lessens over the summer. From the top we can see that the weather ahead is glorious and there are blue skies all around. The russet track curls all the way down the green valley like a snipped ribbon. The skin of the mountains is streaked with

the vertical scars left by falling rocks. The road has no barrier and its edge is a sheer drop many metres below.
'Want to drive?' Bjarni says, apparently not ironically.

'Not now, thanks. Another time.' I can barely look out of the window as a passenger, though I suspect being the driver helps with feeling in control. I am just not ready for so much newness in one day.

We descend the other side of the pass into Arnarfjörður – Eagle Fjord. When we reach the bottom and drive alongside the shore, the water sparkles like hammered silver. A majestic waterfall cascades down the head of the fjord in strands, like layers of long white hair.

'Remember the name of that one?' Bjarni tests me.

'Dynjandi.'

'Good. Meaning?'

'Making a din.'

'Correct! *Well done* my love!'

As we approach with open windows we hear Dynjandi's thundering grow louder. We turn off the road to the small car park at the bottom, where dandelions are starting to bloom in a meadow – the first flower of summer scattering yellow into the greening skygrass like daytime constellations. The thundering fills the air, the sound taking on a tangible form. It is insistent but not imposing: it simply insists that words are unnecessary. I recall the name Rjúkandi, another waterfall near Bjarni's parents' summer house. I remember it means 'smoking' because of the vapour it sends up, visible from far away. I make the connection that the ending *-andi* makes the word a verb; a process. The waterfalls I have met in other parts of Iceland have always been called something *-foss*: *foss* meaning waterfall. Dettifoss – Falling Waterfall, reputed to be the most powerful waterfall in Europe; Goðafoss – Waterfall of the gods, into which – so goes a nineteenth century myth – the Lawspeaker Þorgeir Ljósvetningagoði threw his statues of the Norse gods as he instigated Iceland's conversion to Christianity in the year 1000; Skógarfoss – Waterfall of the Forest, proving that there was forest when these falls were named. I wonder if it is a characteristic particular

to the Westfjordians that their waterfalls are verbs, named for the witnessed outcome of their natures, rather than for their place in topography or history.

Up close I see that Dynjandi descends in terraces, and that the white strands of falling water come from a narrow and very powerful river, spreading over a wide cliff. All the snowmelt from the tops descends here, it seems. The mountaintops in the Westfjords are flat, ground to horizontal by the pressure and movement of millennia of glaciers. I think of the five-metre high section of snow we passed earlier, how that is a minuscule fragment of the snow that has gathered on these mountains all winter, and which now is drawn towards the sea. We scramble up to its different levels – each with a distinct personality – and feel the morning sun on our backs, blooming though our woollen jumpers. We sit leaning against one another; leaning into this life of ours. It feels like the beginning of the year, and the beginning of time itself; the beginning of life. We do not need to talk much, Bjarni and I. This says everything for us. We come down and drink tea in silence sitting at the door of the campervan, a snipe drumming in the air above.

I have longed for this. Our stories have led us here. No matter how disparate our origins, our union feels like a given, as if we were waiting to meet all these years. This is a story neither of us have written, and this story is a verb. We are simply listening.

Our reverie is broken by remembering we are on a schedule. We climb back into *Maríubjalla*, me behind the steering wheel. I feel confident to drive now: no sheer drops, just mountain desert plateau. We bounce up the track beside Dynjandi until we are above it; cross the river from which it issues and look down on Arnarfjörður. The sea surface dazzles light and a boat draws a dark line of wake across it. The profiles of the mountains separating us from home recede in flat layers of ever-deepening blue. Up on top the snow glows brightly, its crystals sparkling in the sun. Where there is no snow the plateau is gravelly and sodden: the ground is saturated and there is little vegetation to drink it. Small pools of melt water pocket beside the road.

A little further on we spy the blue curve of Breiðafjörður – Wide Fjord – opening out beneath us, down on the other side of the plateau. It is scattered with thousands of tiny islands glowing a yellow green, like an Earth before landmasses collided. One of those islands is where we are heading. Flatey – 'Flat Island'. There are no buildings at all in this landscape, and no trees tall enough to interrupt the view, all the way from here to Stykkishólmur – the ferry terminus on the other side of the bay. Space takes on a temporal dimension. We can

make out the lone ferry that we shall soon embark: a speck making its way towards us, still far away. I feel if I looked hard enough, I could see us sitting on Flatey tonight, a fire lit on the beach, thinking and looking back to now.

We descend along a gently rolling gorge which becomes dense with willow and birch, and we are birthed onto the coast road as the ferry grows larger on the horizon. There is still time for a soak in the hot spring – one of my favourites, right next to the sea. The small gravel car park has one vehicle in it. On our way down to the shore we meet the farmer who owns the land, and the spring. He has just cleaned it out ready for the summer season, but today we have it to ourselves. We slide into the clear, hot water, which trickles in from a small cascade down the cliff. The pool is made of a circle of rocks arranged around it and is deep enough to submerge our shoulders when sitting. Water splashes over the stone wall onto the stone beach, and eider ducks cruise calmly in the nearby shallows. We know by looking at the sea when we will need to move: we can monitor the ferry's approach from the hot spring.

At 5.30 we pull up at the wooden cabin at Brjánslækur, which serves as a ticket office and café, and explain our slightly complex journey: Brjánslækur – Flatey today; Flatey – Stykkishólmur tomorrow. The girl's blank stare suggests Elín has not passed on any messages. But it is all fine, and we board the ferry leaving *Maríubjalla* on deck and head up to the viewing lounge. Before we climb the stairs a crew member corners Bjarni and says:

'Keys?'

Bjarni hands them over, then a smile of recognition spreads over both of their faces. '*Nei Hæ!*'

'Davíð this is Sarah my dearest. Sarah: Davíð. We used to work together.'

I love that the Icelandic word for girlfriend is 'dearest': *kærasta*. While I long to be able to express my own identity, I am happy with this as a label. It beats *tengdadóttir Hauks Kálfs*: 'daughter-in-law of Haukur of Kálfavík', which is what took hold while Bjarni was at sea. They chat briefly in Icelandic, catching up on the past few years as Davíð directs cars onto the deck. Then Bjarni takes my hand and we continue upstairs.

'How come you gave him the van keys?' I ask.

‘There’s no cars on Flatey.’

‘But, so...how does it work then?’

‘Davíð will park it for us at Stykkishólmur and we’ll get the keys back tomorrow.’

‘Do they explain that to anyone else when they ask for their keys?!’

‘I guess...if they ask.’

‘But our stuff’s still in the van.’

‘Oh shit, yeah.’ He runs back towards the car deck. ‘What do you need?’

‘The bigger bag. And the firewood.’

‘OK.’

‘And the *cider!*’

I go out onto the viewing deck and sit on the hard, white plastic benches. It is sunny and bright, but the breeze has a real chill now we are on the water. Snæfellsjökull glacier is a near neighbour, standing tall to the south. I go to the railings as the ferry pulls out of the harbour and Bjarni reappears with my film making kit bag slung over his shoulder.

‘Thought you’d want this too. The rest’s in the luggage racks.’

‘Ah *thank you*!’ The kit bag is so integral to my self that I forgot to mention it, and the facts had not quite caught up with me that I was about to be separated for the night from anything I was not holding.

The world around us is a cold pearlescent blue. I snuggle into Bjarni’s bear-like side and pull my hat down over my ears. This journey has been much more straightforward than our attempts to arrange it, and I begin to appreciate the expression I hear most often: *Þetta reddast* – ‘It will sort itself out.’ Now we are on the sea I feel suspended inside the time and space that kept switching places up on the plateau. This place is like nothing I have ever

seen: hundreds of tiny islands and skerries appear to float and are doubled in the calm water. Puffins criss-cross comedically between them, the bright orange triangles of their webbed feet dragging behind their frantically flapping wings. Fulmars dance with the ferry's wake, diving for churned up quarry. The sky is blue. The Westfjordian mountains to the north are deep blue and table-like. Snæfell mountain to the south is cone shaped; liquid and solid at once, ridged and i with snow.

Peckish, we descend to the canteen in the underbelly of the boat to order a burger. It smells of frying fat and the spiced salt that is sprinkled on chips with abandon; and diesel. Behind the counter I notice boxes of chocolate bars called *Prince Polo*, *Þristur* and a third, wooden box that is marked *Lyklar.* I know this means 'keys'. So *that* is the system. We eat our greasy burgers in the dingy canteen. It hits a spot but I'm glad to return to the deck.

It could be an hour, or a day, that passes before the engine begins to hum at a lower frequency and I notice a flat island with a scattering of shapes and bright colours that signals human habitation. As we draw closer I see that most of them are the old style, like our house, clad in corrugated iron with decorative window surrounds. There are no trees. Faded fluorescent buoys are scattered along the shoreline, and the wrecked hull of a wooden boat lies beached askew on the south shore.

There is a small gathering of people at the harbour. One catches my eye in particular: an old man with a white beard and a sparkle in his eye visible from some distance. He wears a sailor's cap on his head and a red neckerchief tied in a knot at the collar of his oversized anorak. Beside him is a wheelbarrow. The ferry docks and only we walk down the gangway. This man reaches out his arm to greet us.

'Hafliði. *Velkomin.*'

This is our host, and the wheelbarrow is our luggage transport. We follow him, delighted, up the only track to the former Doctor's House – a carved wooden sign above the door telling us so: now Hafliði's home, and our bed for the night.

He passes us our luggage and notices my video camera.

'*Nú.* Are you making a film?'

‘I think so, but I am not sure what it’s about yet,’ I smile apologetically. The look he gives back suggests he understands how this can be so.

Once we have stepped into his warm house we realise that the early start and the cold sea air has taken it out of us. We have a nap. Everything I have seen today needs time in a crucible of dreams. When we wake, the view out of the window is more ethereal than a dream. The light is lower now and the cold blue everything is galvanised in orange. I cannot wait to be sitting down on the beach, with the eiders and the cider.

We wrap up warm and grab the bag of firewood. Hafliði’s wife Olöf runs into us at the door.

‘Got everything you need?’

‘Yes thanks.’

‘What’s that?’ she asks, pointing to our bag.

‘We’d like to have a little fire down on the beach. Such a beautiful evening!’

‘Well you needn’t have brought any wood! There’s a great pile of it down by the shore. We collect it all year for our New Year’s bonfire. Help yourself!’

As we approach the pile it makes our small bag seem laughable. It is driftwood, offcuts of structural timber, old furniture, all piled high – and it is only May. At the very top of the pile, as if placed there for this precise moment, are two beautiful antique armchairs, upholstered in olive green velour. We fish them off the top and place them both facing the sea behind a tiding of dulse.

Bjarni builds a small fire and I crack open the brown glass bottles. We sink into the armchairs and watch a nursery of eiders float by. I remember back to the time I first met his grandmother and she placed us in chairs facing each other, because our relationship was new. ‘One day you will want to look in the same direction,’ she had said. We are warm, we are comfortable, and we are in one of the most beautiful places on earth. We feel truly blessed. This is perfection: my cider, Bjarni’s view, armchairs and a fire gifted by providence. It turns out you don’t need trees to have a fire. You can have abundance without growth. Or can you? The trees that made this timber had to grow somewhere.

‘When shall we get married then?’ Bjarni asks without any ceremony whatsoever. The only discussion we have had about marriage was about how we felt already united, and how a party would be fun, to celebrate that fact.

‘Twenty-third of June. I don’t care which year, but I like that date,’ I respond, surprised by my calm reaction to what is happening.

‘You know that’s *Jónsmessunótt* – Midsummer’s Night?...’

‘I didn’t, no. I just like the number twenty-three. And June seems like the best month for the weather. But...even better!’

‘...When the seals remove their skins and reveal their human forms? And the cows speak?’

‘Done.’

‘*Skál!*’ We clink our bottles together and take a swig of England; drink in this bright Icelandic night.

Selur – Seal

I don't know how many hours we spent sitting in our armchairs on the beach last night. The difference between high tide and low tide on Flatey is four metres. As the water inched up towards our seaweed frontier, I remember trying to persuade Bjarni that we should ask his friend Davíð from the ferry to get those armchairs back to Brjánslækur so we could pick them up later. It's the kind of thing that feels entirely possible around here.

'And then?'

'You could pick them up in the van on your way back home.'

'No, I couldn't. They're too big for our van. And I won't be coming back the same route.'

'Your dad will be working over this way soon, won't he?'

'He's got the same sized van as us. And it's full of tools.'

'But they're so beautiful! I can't believe antique armchairs are just going to get burned.'

Bjarni shrugs. When it comes to our life together, Bjarni and I seem to have been allocated shared quotas of both dreaming and pragmatism. One rarely makes use of either at the same time as the other. It is a dance. But the outcome always seems to be resourcefulness and abundance, and very occasionally, frustration.

As the fire flickered and glowed at our feet, we watched the sun descend slowly in the sky; the seaweed sigh and plop in the lapping waves; pairs of oystercatchers commuting, their sturdy orange beaks almost glowing in the low-angled light; a curious gull in its slow repeated fly-by, meeting our gaze each time in a sideways glance.

There was a phrase in the evening in which the sea and the air stilled; completely stilled. Every single blade of grass was in the sharpest focus, each one with its own height, shape, shadow and character. At a barely perceptible moment, droplets of dew the colour of clarity formed on these blades, suddenly, like an implicit agreement coming to fruition. A golden world of sea and islands, pebbles and seaweed, dandelions and lambs, tractors and brightly

coloured houses, was instantly contained within each crystal globe, curved into a new reality.

The day had been full; rich. A chill came with the stillness even if darkness didn't, and we finally turned in.

We slept deeply in this Doctor's House, in our room which has something of a teenager's bedroom about it, circa 1984: grey curtains with diagonal blue and red stripes, matching bedding, and a red plastic-coated bed head. This is the first Icelandic guesthouse I have stayed in: we have always stayed with family or friends, or in the van. I now realise it is an Icelandic thing, rather than a Bjarni's family thing, to have two single duvets on a double bed.

'It's not always a couple sharing a bed,' Bjarni explained. 'Could be friends; family members. Anyway, this way couples don't spend the night wrestling for the duvet.'

I found it lacking in intimacy at first, but soon began to appreciate the genius of the idea. You can sleep alone, together.

* * *

Feeling refreshed and looking forward to the day we have to explore the island, we make our way down to the kitchen. Ólöf, Hafliði's wife, has prepared a breakfast spread of gouda, bread, cucumbers, sliced red peppers, rhubarb jam, pancakes and whipped cream, and a huge thermos of coffee. She is a round woman in her seventies who seems always to be grinning. Her apron is smeared with finger-streaks of flour.

'Please, sit down. Help yourselves.' Ólöf lifts her head slightly when she speaks to us so that she can look through her glasses, which live halfway down the bridge of her nose. 'Good fire?'

'Very good,' Bjarni smiles, pulling out a chair. 'You're right. Plenty of firewood!'

'Yes. We've even decided to get married!' I add, slightly surprised that these words have fallen out of my mouth at all, but also to a complete stranger before anyone else. The reality of it seems to belong to this island in a way I cannot quite explain.

‘Congratulations!’ Ólöf beams. ‘When?’

‘*Jónsmessunott.*’

‘*Perfect!* Egg?’

‘Yes please,’ Bjarni grins. ‘Fried’.

He loves a spread. I know there will be little left when he’s done. We look into the back garden and see their hens jabbing at the bright green grass.

‘Ah, your own eggs. Great! Fried for me too please.’

‘Just started laying again recently.’

‘We’re going to get hens aren’t we Bjarni?’

‘Yep.’ He is loading a slice of bread with rhubarb jam and cheese – a combination I have been converted to.

I establish that this has been Ólöf and Hafliði’s family home for many years, that the children have moved out but one of them lives next door with his wife. He’s out fishing at the moment – good weather for it. I wonder if that’s his old bedroom we’ve been sleeping in. The Doctor’s House guesthouse is officially Ólöf’s business and she is also the post mistress of the island, and makes jam and handicrafts to sell to tourists when they start arriving, which is soon.

Bjarni does not ask questions, I’ve noticed. My curiosity, when juxtaposed with his way of simply being, sometimes makes me feel like I am interrogating, rather than just being interested.

Bjarni stirs whipped cream into his coffee.

‘Can I see your handicrafts later?’ I ask Ólöf.

‘Of course!’

Hafliði glides into the kitchen with the smell of outside on him, and a rifle slung over his shoulder. He hangs it on the back of a chair and pours himself some coffee.

‘The birds are arriving. Beautiful this time of year, before it gets busy.’

He pulls a photo album from a shelf and sits down beside me; starts flicking through it. I speak a little Icelandic to him and he speaks a little English to me and whenever we can’t understand one another we turn to Bjarni. Hafliði points at a photo of a man holding a boom microphone with a fluffy cover, clearly taken just outside this house.

‘Like you. Know Chris Watson? Englishman.’

‘Is that Chris Watson?! Actually, I have met him once.’ He is a sound artist who did many of the recordings for David Attenborough documentaries, and he was a guest lecturer on my Ethnographic Documentary MA.

‘He was here. Stayed in Doctor’s House.’

‘No way!’

‘Recorded birds. I listened through his headphones.’ He lets a long slow whistle escape through his teeth. ‘Flatey went into him.’

‘I can believe it. Same here.’

I flick through the photos and see how little Flatey has changed. It is a place apart, where time stretches and then curves to fit inside drops of dew at midnight.

‘What is plan today?’

‘Just have a wander until it’s time for the afternoon ferry.’

‘See the church. There’s beautiful mural.’

He gets up from the table. ‘I go to help my son now. He sent message they caught a seal.’

‘Can we come with you?’

‘*Já*.’

‘Bjarni?’

‘I’m still eating breakfast.’

There’s not time to wait: Hafliði is already at the door, so I follow alone. I grab my stills camera and nothing else. We stroll the one hundred metres down to the harbour, where Hafliði’s son’s small boxy white fishing boat is mooring. As the large ferry also has to dock here, the harbour wall is high and towers above this boat. The catch has to be lifted out by a crane and winch. Gulls circle above and dive at the water as the guts are swept overboard. A beige plastic tub full of cod is lifted up, then across, then down onto the jetty – fishy water squirting out of the drainage holes in the corners.

The crane hums back down and a woman in bright orange rubber dungarees hooks at something in the bottom of the boat. The cable is winched up again and, like a soul leaving a body, a horizontal dark mass peels into the air and rises vertically, snout down, tail up, spinning on an invisible point. The crane’s arm reaches across to position the seal over Hafliði’s wheelbarrow parked on the jetty. The seal sways now, and turns, in a trance-like dance, round and round like a dervish. My imagination puts music with this motion. It is dead, but it is animate: I am entranced. I wonder how I can have *not* brought my video camera for this fluid moment. I try to just watch it; take it in.

The seal lands gently but inelegantly in Hafliði’s wheelbarrow. With bent legs he hoists it up and heads towards the gutting shed. I run to open the door for him.

‘I will skin this later, if you want to film that?’

‘Can I?’

‘Sure.’

I walk back to the Doctor’s House to see how Bjarni is getting on with breakfast, and to look at Ólöf’s handicrafts. Bjarni has alleviated the need for much washing up, wiping the plates

clean with a salivated index finger. He actually licks the plates at home, and I wondered how far he'd go in a guesthouse. He eats with an Arctic mentality: as if you must take advantage of abundance when it exists, as there may be times of dearth. In his father's generation this was a real concern, but now the dearth never seems to come. He is larger than his father.

Ólöf's handicrafts are displayed on a bookshelf in her living room. She has some beautiful hand-knitted mittens in the old style, with angular points in the hands, and a snowflake pattern. There are woollen socks, a few Icelandic jumpers, lava bead necklaces that I see everywhere and now know the lava they are made from is not Icelandic. The rhubarb jam has just been made, rhubarb being the first fruit of summer, pressing pink and urgent out of the wakening ground. Rhubarb being too the beginning of my story with this place, the reason I am here. I see a pile of skins in a box: furry, white and flecked with grey spots.

'What's this?'

'Seal skin,' she responds nonchalantly.

I hadn't ever seen a dry seal and was surprised at how pale and fluffy it was. They look so dark and slick when they're wet.

'*So many!* So...do you *hunt* seal?'

'We don't go out looking for them, but if my son sees one when he's fishing, he shoots it – if it doesn't have a pup.'

'So Hafliði will be adding to this pile, and your family will eat the meat?'

'*Já*. Seal meat is special.'

'Isn't it?' I respond, an internal jolt prompting me to reflect on how living here has changed my attitude. I have tried seal a couple of times. Haukur and aunt Yrsa always seem to have a small supply, and bring it out on special occasions.

Bjarni is ready now to be my sound guy. I am not sure if I am ready to be a camerawoman. I have so many questions, that I don't know how I will film without asking them. I am trained in observational documentary – a style in which events are allowed to unfold and the

protagonists tell their own story through their actions, in order to present an 'authentic' representation of reality. There is no voiceover, no presenter and no interviews. The film-maker is usually the invisible or unobtrusive observer; the fly on the wall. It does not feel particularly authentic to me to make out that I am invisible, when I am present and implicated in entanglements which shall be ongoing, and not only for the camera's interest. When I was in school the current scholarship talked about self-reflexivity: acknowledging and unpacking the presence of the anthropologist film-maker, their impact on the scene, and the baggage and preconceptions they brought to 'the field'. But films in which the film-maker did this effectively on camera, or through the structuring of the film, remained uncommon. Though the depth of my curiosity borders on the ethnographic, I am not an anthropologist here. I am Sarah trying to understand this place because I am in love with it, and in love with a man who is so deeply *of* it. If I wish to know something of someone, or they wish to know something of me, who am I to stay silent, or invisible? We are all trying to make a life on this island. I decide to head out the door with my video camera and see what happens.

I get as far as the picket fence at the front of the Doctor's House before something intrigues me already. I press the record button. A dead raven is flopped over the fence, wedged between two uprights: it has been placed there. I zoom in on the bluish gloss on its wing feathers, the diffused reflection of overcast sky in its solid black beak. Flies begin to land around its eyes.

'It was bothering my lambs.'

Suddenly Hafliði is behind us, his gun slung over his shoulder again. I swing round slowly and point the camera at him. He doesn't mind a bit. He is just slightly unsure whether to look at me or the camera, which is at chest height.

'Hopefully the other ravens will heed the warning,' he continues.

Bjarni starts talking to him. While I don't understand every word they are saying, I can tell that it's interesting. But there's not much point having footage that has two voices but not two faces. Bjarni is both 'Icelander' and 'sound guy'. What to do? Both of these labels are crude. I frame them both – Bjarni wearing headphones and holding my shotgun microphone. I hear and understand Hafliði say he doesn't like ravens. I have come to respect them a lot. I cannot help but interject; jump to the ravens' defence – in Icelandic. Hafliði not only understands me but responds in Icelandic. This is a first. Up until this moment, when I have

tried to speak a whole sentence in Icelandic, people have turned to Bjarni and asked '*Hvað er hun að segja?*' ('What is she saying?'). Now we are all having a conversation – Hafliði, Bjarni and Sarah – and the record light is still flashing. It is messy, but it is truthful. Nobody is subject or object.

Bjarni and Hafliði begin to walk down to the gutting shed, where the seal is, and I follow, running alongside like an idiot trying to film them walking towards me, then walking away from me. What is this for? When we get to the shed it is easier: a contained space with a man who has a task: to skin a seal. Hafliði asks Bjarni to help him lift the seal onto the metal work surface. Bjarni puts down the boom mic and strides towards the seal. I call him back as he is still connected to me via the headphone cable, umbilical. I decide it's best if I wear the headphones: I'll signal to Bjarni if there's a sound problem. It seems likely that he will be occupying multiple roles.

They lay the seal on its back. It is a lighter colour than when it was fresh out of the water, but still nothing like the white furry skins in Ólöf's living room. Once the seal is laid out on the work surface and Bjarni has the mic in position, we all seem to drop into a silent groove, our roles both clear and natural. It is captivating to watch, to listen to, and judging from Hafliði's focussed expression, captivating to perform. He has clearly done this many times. I get the sense Bjarni is taking this in as something he wishes to learn how to do, so he is not losing out by not having the headphones. But the sound of the sharp knife slicing through the skin is so extraordinary and crisp, that when I shift positions with the camera I pass the headphones back to him to let him share in it. His eyes widen, and he gives me the thumbs up. His experience has just been heightened.

Like an emperor dividing up territories, Hafliði scores lines around the flippers, the tail and the neck. In one steady, dextrous sweep he scores from the neck line to the tail line. The grey continent is now intersected with white borders. The knife is turned horizontal and slipped under the skin where the neck line meets this meridian, and tugged along it loosening the skin from the blubber. Hafliði moves the knife up and down this meridian a few times, travelling further from the line each time. Then he does the same on the other side. Quick and steady: alternating one side then the other. Soon, the skin lifts off; a skin that will join the pile in Ólöf's living room. Where a seal lay moments ago, is now a mound of ivory white blubber with grey flippers, grey head and grey tail. My world is inverted once again.

One might think that only so much can happen in twenty-four hours on an island less than

two square-kilometres wide, with a permanent population of five. But it is exactly this fathomability of scale, and this absence of distraction, that opens my body to take in what is there, and dive ever deeper. I am no longer having to filter out noise – visual or aural. I am present and curious, and life crackles through me as it does through everything else. So much has already happened this morning – a potent lifetime of images – but it's still well before noon. We have the day to explore this tiny island before the ferry comes for us, to complete the final leg of the route we began yesterday. This pause has been a cleft into a layer beneath the one we usually inhabit. Iceland is allowing me to tumble down these clefts with a frequency I have not experienced before. This one on Flatey is particularly deep and I have no urgent desire to climb out.

We wander back up the track from the harbour towards the handful of houses that make up the village: past a redshank piping on a fencepost, one leg bent beside the straight one like a luminescent rune; past the one red tractor; circled by the island's only dog. We get to the highest point of this Flat Island – the site of the church that Hafliði has recommended we see.

I remember watching a film on TV a few years ago at my 'in-laws'' house called *White Night Wedding* by Icelandic director Baltasar Kormákur. It was set on Flatey and one scene happened in this church. Part of the plot involved the groom's flashbacks to a former relationship with an artist, who strewed seaweed in beautiful patterns throughout their house, across the bed and down the stairs, to express what she was feeling. I remember being struck then by the idea of taking what you have to hand – your shared world of matter – to convey, to challenge or to construct concepts that seem unnameable; to give them something familiar to be hooked onto.

We step inside the church. Hafliði is right. All across the vaulted ceiling and above the altar is a vivid, dynamic mural. It is not only beautiful but relevant. It weaves the rocks, the sea, seals, lambs, birds and the people of this place into fragments of many stories from the Bible and from here. It was painted by Catalan artist Baltasar Samper and his wife Kristjana in the 1960s in exchange for food and board on Flatey. In typical Icelandic connectedness, they are the parents of Baltasar Kormákur, the film director. I read that each of the faces – Jesus and his disciples included – is based on people who lived here, or still do. Each time they came to church they could recognise themselves. There are fishermen in boats, a man scraping clean a seal skin, a woman doing laundry on a washboard, priests praying, laymen reading, a man catching a puffin. Through a textured white wake at the top of the arch, created where

the sea of one scene meets the sky of another, a white-tailed eagle courses towards Jesus, above the altar. The Messiah is not robed in white, staring at the heavens. He is a bearded, broad-shouldered fisherman dressed in an Icelandic jumper, looking out at me. Kneeling at his feet I see a man with the face of Hafliði. Like a dew drop forming, this arched ceiling and this artist have met to curve a lived moment into something eternal.

Þakkið – Roof

May 20th 2011

I arrive in Nairobi to find that my grandmother, Nan, has been rushed to hospital, ten days before her ninetieth birthday. Her Parkinson's is advanced, and she cannot swallow. I manage to tell her that I am engaged, and about my house, and my first full winter in the Arctic, but she has tubes down her throat and her wrists are tied to the bed to stop her from pulling them out.

'Bjarni sends his love,' I tell her.

Her eyes beam in recognition from behind an oxygen mask.

A few days later, she dies. 'Nan never wanted to be ninety,' I consoled mum. 'She said it was too much.'

Even though there have been a couple of scares before, mum – her only child – does not seem to be prepared for this moment. It is strange to hear her making phone calls now about how best to dispose of a body. It will be a cremation, so that her ashes can be taken back to England when my parents return. Nairobi was never Nan's 'home': she was moved out here aged seventy-three when it became clear my parents were not returning to England anytime soon. But she grew into it well. She enjoyed the weather and the birds. And she liked her friends at the nursing home where the residents live in bungalows with support staff and an on-call nurse, albeit bungalows with bars on the windows, like my parents' house and every house we know – one of this city's defences between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'.

Several phone calls throw up two options: the municipal crematorium or the Hindu crematorium. This would have been an easy choice for my Christian mother had she not just been told by a friend that the municipal crematorium's furnace is known to malfunction. Sometimes they wrap coffins in cardboard and douse them in petrol to help them burn, she was told.

Mum deems it preferable for Nan's body to be under the watchful eyes of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. She speaks loudly and slowly down a crackly phone line to the Hindu

crematorium, trying to understand, and to be understood: how it will work; how we will get the body from the hospital to the funeral parlour and from the funeral parlour to the Hindu crematorium.

‘They’re offering cremation on a pyre or in an oven,’ she reports to me and dad, covering the mouthpiece with her hand. ‘I’m thinking the pyre.’ Her face is making an expression I am familiar with from growing up here. It happens when she is using all of her resources to convince herself, and others, that everything is under control when it is quite clearly not.

‘Are you sure? You realise you’d be able to see her body parts burning, mum?’

She is taken aback by the plainness of my truth telling. She clearly doesn’t like either option, but concedes I have a point.

‘Oven please, then’ she hammers, her voice cracking.

The hospital, the funeral parlour and the Hindu crematorium are on completely different sides of Nairobi, a heavily congested city at the best of times. Much of the next few days is spent in traffic. It is a far cry from Ísafjörður – that faraway now-hometown of mine, where kindergarten, school, nursing home, hospital and cemetery are all built along a short stretch of road. There, there is no crematorium, and burial dates are determined by when the ground is thawed enough to dig a grave.

We make the decision to go ahead with Nan’s birthday party at my parents’ house, reinventing it as a memorial. Catering has already been arranged, a marquee hired, and Nan’s friends are coming, so we might as well seize the opportunity.

A few days before this, the time comes for her ‘funeral’: the only time that all three services involved in her death and disposal could co-ordinate. There are just a few of us: me, mum, dad, a family friend, her nurse, the nursing home manager, and the priestess. The body has been transported to the funeral parlour by the hospital.

Mum opts to see Nan’s body one last time, but I decline. I prefer to have the memories of the three months Bjarni and I spent dropping in for tea, watching the birds together, telling her all about Iceland. Mum comes over, looking disturbed.

‘*Her wedding ring isn’t on her finger, and it’s not in the bag of stuff they gave me from the hospital,’* she strains in a whisper.

Wow. Stealing a ring from a corpse. We will never know whether it was someone at the hospital, or someone at the funeral parlour, and there is no hope of getting it back. It is the way it is. I am surprised but also not.

The last rites are read at the funeral parlour and Nan’s coffin is loaded into a hearse: a black Toyota Hiyace van, like our campervan back in Iceland, and also like all the *matatus* – the public transport minibuses that swarm Nairobi. I decide to ride in the hearse so as not to leave Nan alone should the driver get lost. As I climb in I notice there is a coloured light on the roof, like on a police car. We slip into the gridlock of traffic – mum and dad a few cars ahead.

‘What’s the light for on the roof?’ I ask the driver once we’re on the move.

‘It is a siren. In the bush when there is a funeral, maybe the body is being carried from the city, back to the home place. So, when we drive back to the home place with it, we can put the light and the siren and inform people that in the area there will be a funeral. Jungle telegraph!’ he laughs heartily. ‘Shall I put it now for you?’.

‘No. No, thanks.’ I cannot help but allow a laugh to escape.

I have not been present at many deaths. This is the weirdest so far and I doubt it will be out-weirded. I like the idea of a body being returned home. I look out on the seething mass of movement that is Nairobi and think about how many people die displaced.

‘Where is your home?’ he asks me.

‘Iceland.’

‘Ice...?’

‘Iceland.’

‘Me I don’t know it.’

‘OK, you know England, then north of there is Scotland...’

‘Manchester United!’

‘Yup, north of Manchester is Scotland...’

‘I know Scotland.’

‘And then more north, really far up...that’s Iceland.’

‘More north than Scotland? Eeeh! So…it’s north of the world!’

‘North of the world.’ I nod in admiration at how he has nailed the feeling of that place.

We proceed through car horns and smog, street vendors and disfigured beggars to the Hindu crematorium. There, my grandmother’s coffin is lifted out of the minibus hearse onto a rusty trolley. There is an open-sided, covered area organised into rectangular piles of logs: the pyre cremation zone. A dog trots around them, snout down, in a never-ending search for something. Together we wheel the squeaking trolley into a spartan marble-floored room, white and grey. One wall is mostly occupied by the oven door: dark glass in which we can see ourselves. Along the other three, statues of Hindu gods about a foot-high rise from the floor. I see bright colours, gestures, eyes: Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, Shiva the destroyer.

I imagine my grandmother in this wooden box; think how this is the last thing she would have expected for herself, but also how she would have accepted it with a smile and a shrug. This is absurd, and so circumstantial. How does a life story end here, which began in a diamond mining town in South Africa as a girl who was ‘dirty white’, as her half-sister bullied her – referring to some coloured ancestry that they did not share. A dislocated end and a confused beginning via fifty years in Southeast English suburbia.

A Hindu man enters and stands in a corner of the room with his head slightly bowed. His dark hair is oiled and parted at the side. His white shirt is spotless and well ironed, and the sharp creases down the front of his trousers divide the cloth into darkness and light. As we step back he pushes the trolley towards the open oven door, his body bent forward. There is no curtain, no pretending. I notice he has bare feet, dark hairs protruding from each toe. The

coffin is offloaded, the trolley removed, and the door clicked shut. He approaches my mother, his head cocked to the side.

‘You want to press the button madam?’

As if on auto-pilot she walks over and presses a round red button. The roar of inferno fills the room. We watch the flames engulf the coffin. The dog continues to circle outside.

Later I call Bjarni and try to relate what has happened. I think I just want to hear about somewhere else, something else; anything else.

‘What are you up to?’

‘I’m putting my cock into a bag.’

‘I beg your pardon?!!’ I explode with laughter and it is needed.

‘I killed it earlier and now I’m cutting it up to put in the freezer.’

A few queries reveal that his aunt Yrsa donated her hens to us straight after he returned from dropping me at the airport. An Arctic fox had got into their coop at her farm: one had died, and the others were traumatised. She had also given us her cockerel. But it being summer the cockerel did not know when to crow, and so it crowed all day and all bright night. A neighbour complained, Bjarni killed it, and he is preparing it for future eating as we speak. I realise he is totally aware of the *double entendre*. I wonder what the word is for *double entendre* in Icelandic.

‘Anything else?’ I smirk.

‘A polar bear washed up, probably from East Greenland.’

‘Alive?’

‘Not any more. Police shot it.’

‘What?!!! They’re an endangered species.’

‘Yup. As usual Iceland doesn’t have a policy for what to do, or money to do much else than shoot, apparently. It didn’t used to happen much. But this is the fourth one in three years...young one. Before that there hasn’t been one for about twenty years I think. They say it was a threat to humans...which is bullshit because it landed in Hælavík, in Hornstrandir – super remote. Some tourists were camping there apparently. Anyway, what about survival of the fittest?’

‘Shit.’

‘Exactly.’

This is yet another detail that is making me re-evaluate Iceland’s environmental credentials, or at least those I projected onto it. Rapidly melting pack ice in Greenland is leaving the bears adrift. Sometimes Iceland is the closest place to make landfall.

‘And the house?’ I continue.

‘Oh *já*! The weather was so good when I came home I decided to just start with the roof, not wait ‘til June. Bit too hot for my liking though. I took the old roof sheets off – that was a quick job. But then the other night I was woken up by water dripping on my toes. Coming from around the ceiling light – bit scary.’

‘Could say that! What happened?’

‘The snow had started again. I had to get Mamma, Pabbi, and Salvar up on the roof in the middle of the night and we nailed on anything we could find – a sail, plastic sheeting, stuff like that. I shovelled the snow out of the attic, but it got a bit wet, so now I’m trying to stop the mould from growing there.’

I can picture the scene: four family members up on a roof in the middle of a bright night, hammering in May snow to save a house. Knowing them they were probably laughing. For the first time since leaving I am relieved not to be there, but sad to have missed it. I’m not sure how I would feel in a home without a roof: it seems to be antithetical to what a home is supposed to provide. At this oblique angle in which I find myself at this moment, though, I can see how similar are these two places I have called home: how everyone is trying to

respond creatively to problems as they arise, with limited resources; how nothing is a given; how encountering these spontaneous ways of doing things is both undermining my reality and expanding it; how everything is a dance between creation, preservation and destruction – Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Who knew that Kenya could be a training ground for a life in Iceland?

A Walk in My Valley

Late June 2011

By the time I return, the new roof is on – a dazzling crinkle of galvanised steel reflecting the never-ending light. Its newness throws the weathered, ageing surface of the house's four walls into sharp relief. We shall have to re-clad the whole thing at some point, before the elements start making themselves at home.

Bjarni has been busy while I've been away. He has built a hen coop and partitioned part of the shed as sleeping and laying quarters for our new flock of five Icelandic hens: Creation. Just outside the hen bedroom, in the corner of the shed, I notice there is a fish hanging from the ceiling, about a foot long, with a scooped incision in its side. Beneath its dull grey skin, the flesh is a deep terracotta; dry-looking.

'Erm, Bjarni?' I say, pointing at it.

'*Rauðmagi*, from my father.'

'*Rauð...magi*. What's that again?'

'The male lumpfish. Means 'red belly'. See?' He points at its underside.

'And it's smoked or what?'

'Let's say 'cured'.'

'So...basically, hung up?'

'Yep. If we keep it out of the sun it will be good for a long time.'

There are barely any flies here, and even in summer the air is cool and dry out of the sun. The wind travels from glaciers and snow-topped mountains. The difference in temperature on each side of the house is enormous: at the back, out of the wind and in the sun, I can feel hot wearing only a vest top. Around the side, out of the wind but in the shade it is cool and I

need long sleeves, even a wool jumper. Where there is wind and shade it is only a few degrees above freezing. The weather forecast differentiates between 'actual' temperatures and 'feels like' temperatures, and now I understand why. I remember when we worked in the mountains we stored our personal supply of perishable food for weeks under the awning on the front step of our bus-home, in only a polystyrene box. It never perished. Here, we are significantly further north. Our shed, it seems, is a lightly ventilated fridge and judging by the absence in its side, this lumpfish is Bjarni's snack whenever he comes to feed the hens: Preservation.

Krummi the raven has gone further from the vicinity of the house for now, higher in the sky. I still put out food for him sometimes, but in summer other sources will be easier to come by. He returns occasionally to tease the neighbour's dog; sit on the fence; see what's happening in the village. Winter is his time for intimacy; his time to excite over the bones and animal scraps I leave on the rock at the front. Now, the hens have taken over as waste managers. Our scraps – vegetable, fish and meat – go to them.

Sometimes they get a treat. Every so often, at closing time at the Old Bakery in Ísafjörður, we acquire a bin bag full of bread and pastries from the owner Mæja, who happens also to be Gyða's neighbour. She is always trying to find things to give us for our home and our life together. She says it is 'special.' The hens go wild for the *snúður* – a dense doughy cinnamon spiral coated with chocolate. Their chests inflate with delight when it thuds into their coop, amongst the grain and crushed mussel shells collected from the shore to strengthen their own egg shells: Creation. They gather round the *snúður*, trumpeting; stabbing staccato with their beaks: Destruction. Anything the hens don't like goes on the compost pile, which is recently begun. There was no point starting one before now, and I wonder if there is any point at all: for nine months of the year, it will be a pile of freeze-dried scraps.

But for now, we are all beginning to relax into this new life, and life courses into us. The fundamentals are taken care of. Each morning when we open the hens' gate, they leave the coop and peck around in the wildflower meadow at the back of the house. The verdant grasses are now taller than them and grow ever up towards the sun. Every thing is colour: the world is no longer blue or grey or white. It has the sound of summer, the sound of the sun – *sól* – in it: yellow *Brennisóley* (meadow buttercup) glowing under our chins; *Garðasóley* – orange and yellow Iceland poppies; deep pink flames of *Hundasúra* – Sheep's Sorrel – the leaves citrus in our mouths; and the pale pink confetti of *Hrafnaklukka* – 'Raven's Clock' – Cuckoo Flower in English. The Icelandic signals a departure; the English an arrival. Amongst all this, the bright red of the hens' combs emerges now and then from

the grasses. Every evening at exactly seven – any change in light indistinguishable to me – the hens return through the open gate of the coop, process up the ramp and through the small opening into the shed, made small enough that a fox cannot follow them: Preservation.

Bjarni has dug a vegetable patch at the front, some distance from the house so as not to be damaged when we do come to replace the cladding. A hitchhiking tourist who was after an 'authentic' experience came and helped him for a day. The soil was full of rocks and they used them to build a low stone wall, to create shelter from the cool wind.

'I thought it was like a labour camp,' Bjarni told me. 'But he seemed to enjoy himself. Mamma fed him haddock after.'

He has planted potatoes. Now I will plant my seedlings; see what survives. It is good to be home and tending to it. Much more than cultivating vegetables, I am cultivating a life: a way of belonging that is a constant improvisation. One that allows me to be part of a web of relationships and one in which I have agency. This life is my loom. There is uncertainty and abundance. This is where I get to be Sarah, and Bjarni's 'dearest'.

Before I left for Kenya I was told that the local tour company urgently needed French speakers to guide cruise ship tourists for the summer months. I went to their office.

'I speak French,' I told them. 'And English, obviously.'

'You happy to do both then?'

'Sure.'

'OK. We'll contact you whenever we know the bookings from the ship, like, the day before. Here's a docking schedule for the summer so you have an idea. Most shifts it will be one tour, maybe two.'

I couldn't believe that was it: no interview, no CV required. No one on their staff could speak French to check that I could speak French: my word was enough. Why did Bjarni and Gyða let me spend so long making an Icelandic CV when I arrived? Why did *they* spend so much time helping me translate it? I have never used it. Or at least I have tried to hand it in on my job searches, but I have been met with blank stares. Through doing it I learned some words

at least, each word being many:

Ferilskrá – CV (*ferill* – track/trace; *skrá* – written record).

Sjónrænnmannfræðingur – visual anthropologist (*sjónrænn* – visual; *mann* – human; *fræðingur* – expert).

Tungumál – language (*tunga* – tongue; *mál* – affairs/ business).

Tvítyngdur – bilingual (literally 'double-tongued').

Kvikmyndargerðarmaður – film-maker (*Kvikmynd* – film (literally 'motion picture'); *gerðar* – maker; *maður* – man.

Framleiðandi – Producer (*Fram* – forward; *leiðandi* – leading).

And now I am about to be a *leiðsögumaður* – (*leið* – way; *saga* – story; *maður* – man). According to the schedule there are 33 ships coming this summer, and thirteen of them will contain passengers I might guide. The guiding job is freelance, a reflection of the variables in this trade: like any Arctic boom, tourism is fickle. The company clearly doesn't want to deal with permanent staff on its books. Theoretically it means I can do the shifts I want, though I am aware that I might have to seize the opportunity this next two months presents to make most of the years' income. Until I am fluent in Icelandic only menial jobs will be available to me in winter: that has become clear. I would consider working in the fish factory below our house, were it not for the fact that I would learn very little Icelandic in the process: Poles and Filipinos pick the worms out of fish fillets here – each an island as they listen to music through their earphones to alleviate the boredom.

The house is secured against the winter to come, the hens are happy and laying, a guiding job is in hand, the cod and haddock move further and deeper in summer, so the trawlers stop fishing. This means Bjarni and I are both home, and the sun is shining. Finally, I feel safe to just be: to work some days and venture out into the valley, and further afield, in my time off. In the absence yet of any compost to enrich the new vegetable patch, Bjarni and I take a spade and a wheel barrow on an evening walk up the valley, where there are horses. We cross the cattle grid to find them there, chewing contentedly on the lush carpet of growth. It is a perfect U-shaped glacial valley. A river snakes the valley bottom, peaty dark and glinting in the sun. Hay meadows flank the river, which is eternally replenished by snowmelt from the mountains soaring above.

‘Good evening, you fine, fine horses,’ Bjarni coos at them. ‘May we take some of your shit?’

It beguiles me how he talks to animals, children and older people alike: those are the beings with whom he is most comfortable, to whom he relates. The mares gather around us, curious. They sniff, and flick their manes, their chest muscles twitching. I feel the warm air from one horse’s nostrils on my open palm, beneficent in the cool of evening. The green bowl of the valley is curved into each of their liquid black eyes. Tentatively we begin to scoop some of the snow-flattened manure out of the grass, and they do not object. I don’t know how much it is rotted but at least we know it is from last summer.

‘You were lucky to be away in May. You missed the worst season,’ Bjarni tells me. ‘As the snow melts, before the new grass comes, all last winter’s dog turds, vomit and fireworks are uncovered, layer by layer. It *stinks*.’

He is likely exaggerating about the concentration of rubbish and excrement, as he exaggerates about many things, in order to make a better story. But when there is so little detritus, any that does exist stands out. Bjarni’s family, more than some, is offended by it, and sees it as the slippery slope that it is. I suppose that a mentality of three hundred and forty thousand people living in an area about the size of England might not result in a culture of accountability for clearing up, though I too wish it would. This landscape elicits a reverence in me. For others it may be an empty space waiting for humans to make their mark: to procreate, to build, to cultivate, to dispose. Briefly, the ‘pristine nature’ is shown to be an illusion.

We pile the manure high and wheel the barrow back home.

‘Know what this is called?’ Bjarni asks, pointing at the wheel barrow.

‘*Skítahjól*?’ I suggest.

Bjarni bends over laughing. ‘A ‘shit wheel’! Nice one my love! I like your thinking.’

Bjarni, his mother and her siblings love word games. They are greatly amused when I invent new words for things I have not yet learned. Sometimes they adopt my word as a family in-joke. I enjoy that: it makes me feel accepted; allowed into their language on my own terms.

They know that I am making my own map. Mine is no different from their ancestors' process of creating a vocabulary for new inventions and concepts from pre-existing words and imaginaries. Like wellies: *stígvél* – 'stepping machines'; or computer: *tölva* – 'number oracle'.

'It's *hjólbörur,'* Bjarni corrects me. '*Hjól...börur* same as wheel...barrow. But I like 'shit wheel' better!'

Broken down, I see how so many of these words are the same as my own, or, they follow the shape of how I would have named something if I was left to describe my own world. Words say much about the way we think, so learning a language is also learning a way to think. This way, this Icelandic way, stirs something old in me. It returns me to a place before, a place of beginning again which is more like 'home' than anything else I have felt. When I notice the sound of a known word come up in an unknown word, I can make camp in that familiar place and explore new routes out from there; get to know what it is hitched onto this time. Little by little I make my world anew: I point, I ask, I am told, and I begin to see how it relates – to my language, to its function, to other parts of its world, and to a history we share.

Learning some words, I journey back to a beginning that is elemental; the very relationships that created the thing crackle into life in the utterance of it. The word for 'electricity' blew my mind when Bjarni explained it: *rafmagn*: 'amber power'. Static electricity was discovered many centuries ago when amber was rubbed with animal fur, he told me, creating a spark. I looked into it further: those sparks were created and documented by the ancient Greek philosophers. Amber's light-inducing properties led them to name it *elektron* (meaning 'formed by the sun'), from which the English word 'electricity' was eventually derived many centuries later. Then in the early twentieth century, electricity as a concept, and the stories of its origins, washed up on these shores, and Icelanders found a way to create it for themselves from falling water, and later from geothermal steam. But they honoured its origins in the naming.

*   *   *

The first words I learned were the names of wildflowers and herbs, as Bjarni and I made our first road trip in *Maríubjalla* in June 2009, at a time of year when the flowers sing loudly for two weeks and the leaves are most potent. I painted some on the inside of the van door, with

their names – *geldingahnappur, klóelfting, holurt* – so they would be the last thing I saw when I fell asleep and the first when I woke up. Gyða has always given me Icelandic herb tea at Christmas – a mix of leaves she has picked that sprout the hillsides in early summer. She has shown me the plants and told me their names. This year, I want to gather my own herbs, in my valley, and give some back to her. I call Gyða.

'Hæ, hæ. Is it still OK to gather the herbs for tea?'

'It's better in early June, before they've begun to flower. The taste is strong in the leaves then, but...just try it. You remember what you're picking?'

I don't think of the plants in English: I got to know them here. What I see in my mind's eye when she asks the question is their shape, their colour and the sound of their name: *ljónslappi* – 'lion's feet'; *rjúpnalauf* – 'ptarmigan leaf'; *blóðberg* – 'blood of the rock'. Only later would these shapes and images become hitched onto Alpine Lady's Mantle, Mountain Dryas, and Wild Thyme, when I had read about them in books.

'That's right. But Sarah...' she interrupts, unusually.

'Yes?'

'What's happened? Do you know you're speaking to me in Icelandic, in full sentences?'

An invisible moment has arrived in which these words I have been gathering like herbs, have infused. There are enough words in me now to improvise a world, to express, and to be understood. I have been speaking Icelandic, and so has she.

'Maybe it was being away. It allowed the words to settle.'

A mutual joy fills the distance down the telephone line and brings us closer. We can communicate.

I walk out the door with this new-found freedom and power, to gather herbs in Knife Valley. Here, walking among the flowers and the fundamentals, I am allowed, and able, to have a relationship with this place. Through words, through imagination, through living and tending, I can go back to a beginning: not *the* beginning – there is no beginning and there is

no end – but *a* beginning nonetheless. One in which my thoughts are not yet housed; one in which they make a home for themselves and take their cue from the place they are in.

Göng – Passage, corridor, tunnel

July 2011

'So, I heard Icelanders believe in elves and trolls?!' A white haired, be-fleeced American tourist leans forward and calls out above the engine noise to my seat at the front of the tour coach. We are ploughing along the seven-kilometre long road tunnel that bores through the mountain between my village, Hnífsdalur, and Bolungarvík – the last village along this stretch of the Westfjords. Visually, it is an uninteresting part of the tour and I often feel compelled to fill it with anecdote. Today, I resist the microphone.

It is a statement that many tourists put to me, a little proud to have some 'insider knowledge' and apparently oblivious to the fact that it is the Statement About Icelanders almost every foreign visitor makes. It is framed as a sort of question, but it seems that what they really want is for me to confirm that from my observations these Icelanders really *are* that kooky, and for me to relate my own experiences here, if any, of the supernatural.

What can I say? Yes, there are legends and place names, hills and rocks and plants and astrological phenomena, Christmas traditions and natural events all associated with elves and trolls; all of which are still related, if the matter arises in conversation at home, or when moving through the landscape. There is *skessujurt* – 'troll woman's herb' (lovage) – growing in my garden. I pass *Tungustapi*, a hill referred to as an 'elf church' every time I drive between the Westfjords and route number one. My mother-in-law has told me that the aurora borealis are the elves dancing, and that you will never see them on New Year's Eve: that is the night the elves come down from the sky to move house.

'I guess they're not moving this year?' I said to her last New Year's Eve when my parents were visiting, and to their delight, the aurora made an appearance after the village firework display.

'It's after midnight,' she responded, beaming.

Bjarni's family often speaks of the *gamla daga* – the 'old days': an amorphous 'once upon a time' spanning the period from the ninth century settlement era to the teller's childhood years. It is at once imaginary and real; faraway and nearby; folkloric and practical. In the

gamla daga, belief in the supernatural surely shaped behaviour. This belief was, and to an extent still is, a murmuring background to existence. It is a doorway through which one might step into a more reciprocal relationship with the land and sea. My surroundings here seem so vast, so volatile, so open, so transcendent and indifferent. I can imagine, in the time before we holed ourselves up in centrally-heated houses around a television-hearth which flickered with Elsewhere, that there was a compulsion to break down the landscape and phenomena into narratives and characters that the limits of the human body could fathom; to which it could relate. Once upon a time, belief in the supernatural must have felt like a means to survive on this rock in the Atlantic, and to navigate uncharted moral territory: brought by the settlers in their wooden ships with the sheep and the Old Language; sown and grown and adapted to this new context.

Just above Ísafjörður, the port into which the cruise ships dock, there is a corrie in the side of the mountain, nicknamed *Trollusæti* – 'The Troll's Seat'. This corrie looms large over us at the end of every bus tour as we round the fjord onto the spit on which Ísafjörður is built, and pull into the harbour where the cruise ships tower at three times the height of the town's tallest building. Allegedly, in the fjord below this mountain, directly below the corrie, the sea bed is deeper than its surroundings. There is one legend associated with this corrie which I tell these tourists as we round that fjord, if only because it might open a doorway for them into a more intimate relationship with this place, that they might then take home to their own places:

The Westfjords is a frilly appendage to the corpus of land that makes up the rest of Iceland. They are joined by an isthmus, and Breiðafjörður, the bay to the west of this isthmus, is scattered with an archipelago of more than 3000 islands – some no larger than a house. It is said that in the gamla daga *– the old days – two troll women wished the Westfjords to be separate, and independent, from the rest of Iceland. Trolls being giants who turn to stone the moment sunlight touches them, the troll women began digging away furiously at the neck of land, so as to achieve their goal before sunrise. In their fervour, rocks fell from their shovels and landed in the bay of Breiðafjörður, becoming the archipelago of islands that exists now. The isthmus narrowed with every scoop of their shovels to the neck of land we see today. One of the troll women wore herself out with all this digging so she sat and rested with her aching feet in the fjord. The corrie we see above us is the impression left by her behind; and the deep harbour the impression left by her feet.*

I have heard people talk of *álfasteinar* – elf stones – several times. They are particular

boulders that have a presence or an especial beauty, where elves are thought to dwell. Roads and buildings have been built around these rocks, so as not to destroy them. I have heard particularly of one road construction project near Reykjavík where a mediator was brought in to communicate with the elves. The elves' permission had not been sought before construction commenced. This was thought to be the cause of a series of misfortunes that beset the project, trucks and diggers breaking down with unlikely frequency. I know an artist, Lisbet, who has an *álfastein* in the basement of her postbox red, early 20th century house. The basement was built around the stone. Lisbet regularly lights candles on it to honour the elves.

And *huldufólk* – the 'hidden people' – they have come up in conversation: a species of being, born from a reworking of the Christian creation story. The *huldufólk* were described to me as small people resembling humans, who are slightly dirty and raggedly clothed. The story goes that Adam and Eve in fact had many children, but when God came to check on them they showed him only two: Cain and Abel. So ashamed were Adam and Eve at how dirty and poorly dressed their other children were, that they hid them. So offended was God at their disbelief in his omniscience that he doomed their hidden children to remain hidden forever. A room can have people in it, but it may be twice as full of hidden people.

But none of these are my experiences, nor the experiences of people I know well.

One thing I can say with conviction is that I have seen a ghost. It happened before I moved to Iceland, early on during the month-long road trip that Bjarni and I took in our campervan in September 2009. It has never happened to me before, and nor has it happened in the same way since: an instance where I was irrefutably looking at an apparition, and what I saw was reconfirmed by another. We were in the south of the country, in a region called Álftaver. Route number 1, the only main road, was at that point some distance from the coast and we were looking for a spot somewhere by the sea that we could park up for the night. Our needs for a park-up were basic but important: flat; with clear running water that would not have been affected by sheep; absent of other people; hopefully with some sort of driftwood or old fence posts we could make a fire with in this treeless land; and preferably beautiful – a quality that was available in spades.

The land there was flat, so we turned off route number 1 along a farm track and headed towards the sea. Either side of the track was coastal flatland with a skin of short cropped green grass and the occasional pink mound of moss campion. I imagined it was peaty

underneath. At no point on our journey had we seen many people – this was Iceland in September after all, after the tourists have left. But something struck us individually as we bumped our way along this track, past a few farm buildings: *there was no life at all.* There was not a sound or a movement in the farm yard, no insects flitting across the windscreen, no sheep, no horses in the fields, no *birds.* There are *always* birds in Iceland. Though I noticed this fact, everything was new to me then. As much as it was an anomaly to my experience so far, it did not disturb me as it did Bjarni.

'I don't like this place,' he said. 'It's so...*lifeless'.*

'Let's just see where this track goes. Maybe it'll get better.'

We continued to the end of the track, and parked. There we found the flat ground raised in geometric rows covered in turf, like the long-deserted ruins of a farm or small community.

'This is spooky.' Bjarni reiterated his discomfort. I was beginning to agree.

We saw, or imagined, doorways, hearths, the life that might once have crossed in and out of these overgrown rectangles.

We needed to fill our water bottles. Bjarni found what looked like a spring, pulsing like a large eye from the skin of grass. He recoiled. I walked over and looked into it. The flow of the clear water tousled a mane of deep green algae that clung to the bank. Intermittently, as it was lifted by the water, it revealed several bones cleaned of flesh and sinew. Sheep bones? Human bones? We did not know. But it was the final cue to leave. If we could not drink this water, *we* could not live here either, even for a night.

Bjarni started the engine and pulled away without hesitation. We bumped back along the dirt track, the dust barely settled since our inward journey. No insects, no birds, no people. We rounded a bend and the farmyard we had passed earlier came into view. The corrugated iron barn emerged like an abstract painting, its flaking painted layers blown off to join with the wind.

'Ah look, there *is* someone!' I exclaimed, palpably relieved.

Bjarni was silent, and attentive to the farmyard. We were driving alongside the open space

of the concreted yard on our left now. Within this rectangle of space was a man on horseback riding towards us, in the opposite direction of travel. I too fell silent as all my energy diverted towards fathoming what I was looking at. There was a man, on horseback. But he, and the horse, did not move like a man on horseback, or like a horse carrying a man. They glided across the yard without the slightest undulation. As the rider's detail came into view it got even stranger.

'Bjarni, tell me what you're seeing right now,' I implored, hoping at once that this was not real but wanting him to confirm he could see it too, so I could know I was not delusional.

'There's a man, on horseback, but he's gliding across the yard...and he has this long, grey, straggly hair down to his chest, but it's...he has no face. The hair is all around.' He continued driving slowly.

'That's exactly what I'm seeing.' As we passed him I turned in my seat to look at the side and back of his head. From every angle he was long, greasy, grey hair. I cannot speak of his features, for I did not see any. There was no face.

'Let's get out of here,' Bjarni said, as if we weren't already.

A few weeks later when we returned to Bjarni's parents' house in Ísafjörður, we regaled them with stories from our trip. Gyða listened attentively, while knitting, and Haukur lay outstretched on the sofa as usual, watching a loud television. This story was the first to be told. It needed telling: we were brimming with it.

Unusually, Haukur turned down the volume. '*Haaaa*. Tell me what this ghost looked like again?' He cleared his throat.

We repeated the details of the gliding, the long messy hair and the absence of a face.

'That's the ghost of Jón Steingrimsson. That's what he looks like, I've heard. He's well known down there.' Haukur stated this not just as a fact, but a fact that appeared to be of the most everyday kind. He turned the volume back up on the television and we continued our evening, my reality shifted tectonically.

I moved to Iceland a year later, into our house that had been inhabited for seventy years by

Bogga, now passed away. But the house's familiar name, *Bogguhús*, reminds us daily how she and it remain inseparable. I feel her presence as an immanence exuded by a home that has been cared for and loved, which has born witness to love and life in its various guises. Mine and Bjarni's is another story for those walls to cradle.

When my family came to visit last year for our first Christmas in this house, Bogga made an appearance of a different nature. For the first time in our co-habiting set up there was tension between Bjarni and I. He appeared to be, and admitted to, intentionally making life difficult for me. I knew there was something deeper going on, but he did not have the tools to articulate it at the time. Naturally it extended to become a tension between Bjarni and my family. It was all the more awkward as I wanted my parents to like him, but in this moment I did not much like him myself.

One night he was out late with friends when the rest of us had gone to bed. Bjarni and I were using the guest room on the ground floor so that my family could have the warmer upstairs rooms. At 2am I was awoken by the loud noise of someone climbing the wooden staircase between floors, then moving the furniture around upstairs. I lay in bed trying to figure out if it could be vermin; and being slightly afraid. I just wanted it to stop so I wouldn't have to see what it was. It stopped, and I went back to sleep. Soon, it happened again. Footsteps climbing the stairs; the scrape of chair legs on floorboards. Unable to take it anymore, I leaped up and went to the staircase, muttering: 'Why on *earth* are they moving furniture around?!' At the top of the stairs there was a trapdoor. I pushed it up and emerged from below, expecting movement, disruption, wakefulness. I found stillness; silence. My parents sleeping, breathing deeply, snoring. *Nothing* was happening. Confused, I returned to the guest room bed.

It happened again. I texted Bjarni:

> **Where are you? Was that**
> **you coming in? If not**
> **either we have a very large rat**
> **or there's a ghost xx**

Bjarni finally returned and I desperately hoped it *would* happen again, just so he would hear it. His warm mound of a body lay next to mine, alert. After a few minutes, there it was: footsteps, moving furniture.

‘It’s likely Bogga,’ he said quietly. ‘She won’t be happy with how things are between us.’

His explanation made a profound kind of sense to me. I could not claim to not believe in ghosts. I had seen one with my own eyes, and now I was living with one. Like the overgrown traces of the farmhouse walls in the south, Bogguhús was not simply a place where we would live *our* lives, but where the legacy of other lives still lived. We lived in a continuum with them. In so doing, we were in a living, breathing relationship with the walls of a house, as much as with the ground these lives were built upon: the earth and the pine panelling still held the echo of their passing. I was beginning to see what it might mean to dwell in a place.

*   *   *

‘Some do believe, yes,’ I say to the American tourist and turn to face the tunnel again, the arch of light at the other side quickly growing larger now. Today I do not fill the silence. Today we are passing through.

Snúið – The Turn

August 2011

The coach driver Trausti and I got along well. He liked a joke and was diligent, and he actually took interest in the landscape we drove through each tour. He was proud of it. Trausti was from Hnífsdalur – my village – and even though he now lived in an apartment block, four kilometres down the road, he would always be a Hnífsdælingur. We had done the full 'Life and Culture' tour with a coach load of English-speaking tourists. This one had been easy. I could be funny in my mother tongue, in a way that was not so fluent when I did the French tours. The English were always a bit stiff on the tours that started early, but they soon lightened up when they realised, with tangible relief, that they would be able to understand my accent because I *was* English. The mood was buoyant, and we were on our way back to their cruise ship. We had just been through the 7km long road tunnel through the middle of the mountain between my village and the next.

'You *must* write a book!' so many of them urged.

'I will, I will,' I promised – to them, and myself, but not convinced of my capacity to put this experience into words in a way that did not compromise it in some way. They just want a good story. I have more investment than that.

We had just emerged from the darkness onto the coast road, when Trausti suddenly turned right, unannounced, into Hnífsdalur.

'What are you doing?'

'We should show them our village, shouldn't we?'

'I guess...'. 'OK everyone Trausti has decided he wants you to see the village where he is from and where I live. My house is this one coming up now on the right.

Trausti slowed at the brow of the hill, where my rusting white corrugated iron-clad house stood facing the sea, marooned in a meadow of wild flowers just behind the village bus stop. The decorative deep red window frames were peeling, and I became aware of how strange

the roof looked now that people I didn’t know were looking at it. ‘Corrugated iron cladding is the best protection against the salt air here. The roof is silver because we have just replaced it and you must let it weather for two years before painting it,’ I explained.

But they didn’t care. They had spotted something else and were drawing their cameras up to the window. Trausti halted at the top of our drive. There, leaning on one elbow on the rickety gatepost was Bjarni. He was dressed in grey corduroys and a tatty coat, chewing on a stem of grass and contemplating the sea. One green welly-booted leg crossed the other and his face glowed pink behind his ginger beard. He was the perfect picture of a ‘rural Icelander’, and everyone on this coach thought so too. A battery of cameras bleep-clicked urgently. Tourists from the opposite side of the coach leaned over the others to capture it too.

I was troubled. In that moment he was commodified in one dimension. People who had never spoken to him would be showing that image at dinner parties, putting it on Facebook. What did they know? I suddenly felt ambiguous about my role. I wanted to show people this place, tell them about the people. I wanted them to get a comprehensive impression, warts and all, while admitting it was only my perspective. But taking an image of my partner and reducing him to a generalisation seemed the very opposite of what I was trying to do. I waved at him apologetically through the glass. I realised I had crossed irreversibly to the inside of this community. For mass tourism, my home was a quaint, slightly decaying ‘traditional’ house. My man was an ‘authentic local’.

Like a true Icelander, Bjarni appeared unperturbed, and the coach continued on.

Innflytjandi – 'in-carrier'/ Immigrant

October 2011

Life has quietened. Now that winter has come, and the cod and haddock are returning to the cooling seas, Bjarni has returned to the trawler to catch them, despite my reluctance for him to leave. No alternative job has presented itself over the summer, and he has done what is easiest.

A couple of weeks ago the tourists vanished in a movement that was both incremental and sudden, like a puddle evaporating in strong sun. They have washed around the place and many of our lives all summer. Much energy has been diverted towards seeing to their needs. Plans have been made around dense shifts of tourism work. Only brief holidays could be taken, despite this being the only season in which domestic travel is really feasible. But with the tourists' arrival, work was created. We were reminded what the world outside of here is like, how members of other nationalities think and behave. Tables and chairs were placed outside the three bars and cafés in Ísafjörður, which bustled with life. Young beautiful Icelanders enjoyed pretending that they were on a European café terrace: exposed their skin, wore sunglasses, sipped frappés. Tourists climbed up beside waterfalls, hired kayaks, bought Icelandic jumpers, tasted rotten shark in the Maritime Museum.

By late August the self-drive tourists in their rental cars and campervans had emptied out, back to their term-time lives in Europe and the USA. September saw a couple more cruise ships disgorge on a place that was perhaps closer to the passengers' fantasies: absent of the other hundreds in brightly coloured anoraks looking for the same pristine solitude. The last tour I guided was on the 22nd – several weeks after Icelandic children returned to school, the bureaucrats returned to their offices, and the Arctic terns took flight back to South America. Finally, the day came when *Boudicca,* the last passenger ship of the year, cruised slowly out across the fjord towards the open sea – right to left across my living room window – after ten hours in port: enough, apparently, for the nine hundred passengers to 'do' the Westfjords. It was a gargantuan block of white, like an iceberg that was far too regularly shaped to fit in, sat upon a dark, sharp-beaked hull. A floating façade, pierced with hundreds of tiny windows from which the passengers gazed at my valley, in which my house sits, in which I sat at my window, looking at them. *Boudicca* vanished into the blue distance and this quieter life returned.

This life has its own rhythm. Its pulse is regular and steady. But each day looks quite different, as the darkness returns like curtains drawing on either side of the day, at either side of the view from my window.

I know I can do guiding work every summer now if I want to. It went well. The pay was relatively good. My tips were generous, and now fill a large jar on my windowsill which once contained *Euro Shopper* gherkins – dollars, pounds, euros, notes and coins jostling for space, ready for the next trip to Europe. The praise was high and the prompts to write a book of my experience of this place helped me feel my observations were valid. It was a boost to my morale to find something I could do here, but this kind of work does not feel real to me. It is a temporary period of frenzy, and I am wary of commodifying this place I love.

Time here has shaken off my ego. I accept I will not find any kind of work that is obviously linked to my qualifications. I must think more laterally. I have not lost sight of my long term aim to make a film about this place. I think the film is about resilience, though at the moment I am preoccupied with learning to understand the edges of my own. But I have spent the summer observing that many visitors come and consume packages of 'Icelandicness'. These packages, repeated and shared, become the narrative as presented to the world, and narrative becomes cliché. Now more than ever, I see how necessary it has been to get inside of this life, before attempting to speak about it.

I speak enough Icelandic now, I think, to have a go at a job that requires regular interaction with Icelanders. So the question becomes not 'What can I do?' but 'What will be most *useful* to me?' A staff discount at the hardware store would be useful while we are renovating the house – that is clear. I spend a lot of my time and money in there already.

I go to Húsasmiðjan, the hardware store, and ask the manager if there is any work available.

'Only in the florist department,' he says, apologetically.

'Even better,' I respond.

I leave with an application form. If I get this job, I will be arranging living things – colourful, *green* things – rather than screws, all the white-grey winter. *And* I would get the staff discount on hardware. This is as good as it will get out of tourist season, for now.

Bjarni is not here to help me fill out the form in Icelandic, so I go to the extension of him: his mother. I am beginning to grasp just how much my perception of what or who Bjarni is, is influenced by what his parents and aunts and uncles do for me in his absence, and what they do for us when he is around. There is no line where they end, and he begins. It couldn't be more different from my own family. Though I know we could depend on each other in times of need, we have lived on different continents since I was sixteen. My entire adult life has been one of independence.

The form is fairly straightforward and Gyða is patient: name, phone number, email, a small box for why I think I am suitable, and no CV requested. Before I leave, she feeds me pan-fried horse meat in breadcrumbs from her brother in the south, and focusses on the positive in her chat: what will be in the future rather than what is now.

'*Þetta reddast*,' she says, for the umpteenth time: 'It will work itself out.'

When I return to the hardware store to hand in the form, I make sure I chat to Laufey, the head florist, so that she can get a sense of me, and hear that my Icelandic is sufficient. Being so basic, the form has reduced me to a few lines, and does not show who I am related to. For once, on the form I stand alone, as myself, but stripped of my professional experience and qualifications, to a foreign woman with 'an eye for colour and form.' For once, though, being able to say I am related to somebody she will know of might be my preferred descriptor.

Laufey is friendly and warm and walks between the counter and the cabinet of fresh cut flowers, selecting stems as we talk. She arranges a bouquet of roses, hypericum and some kind of fir, slicing the ends off the stems, one by one, in deft diagonal strokes. She squints occasionally as she looks at me, as if to see beneath the surface of the slightly choppy flow of Icelandic conversation. I manage to drop in the names of my man and my father-in-law.

'Leave it with me. I'll let you know soon,' she says, wrapping the bouquet in cellophane and curling a ribbon bow with opened scissors.

I know I could do this job sufficiently well. I am fortunate to have an eye for arranging things and I feel the skills needed for creative endeavours pool into one another, even if apparently discrete. I doubt there will be many people applying who can actually arrange flowers, and so I feel confident, given that this seems to be the main part of the job.

Back at home, an email tells me I have been invited to a film festival in Belgrade for a screening and director Q&A of the film I was editing last winter. I decide to go: I don't have a job, I have money and Bjarni is not home. I can still retain a strand of my identity, even if I cannot do it here. A parallel life off this island seems the only way to do it. When I tell Gyða I shall be away for a couple of weeks I get the sense that she does not know how to compute this dual self: an immigrant with basic language skills who will be lucky to get *any* job, and an apparently successful film-maker who attends events internationally. She cannot put herself in either of my worlds and so she smiles and says, 'Great!'. I wonder if she thinks her son is funding my existence, because the kind of work he is doing is visible by his absence, and by his tiredness when he returns.

Before leaving I go to get some Belgrade tips from my Serbian friend Svetlana who lives above the bookshop in Ísafjörður. I tell her I've applied for a job in the flower shop. 'Congratulations! Ah, I hope you get it. That's a *nice* job.'

A couple of days later I take the domestic flight to Reykjavík to catch the international flight. When I land there is a text message from Svetlana.

> **Looks like flower lady gave job**
> **to someone she knew. He's a**
> **guy...Guðni. Doesn't know how**
> **to arrange flowers. That's Iceland**
> **darling! xx**

I am devastated, and it shocks me that I am devastated. It is only an assistant florist position, but still, it is something I could imagine doing and enjoying. Suddenly the prospect of winter has become a long grey blank rather than Gyða's projections of what the future would be. I wonder if I should even return. What am I doing in Iceland if Bjarni is not home? Shouldn't I wait for him to get whatever it is out of his system – feeling indebted to his parents; a kind but misguided intention to support me financially; or something else he has not yet unpicked – somewhere I can make a life that doesn't hinge so completely on him. But my heart is loyal and there is a wedding to plan.

Every time I leave the island to go elsewhere, I go via England to visit friends and family, pick up supplies, gorge on culture. This trip is an ocean of movement, colour and people. This time I am shopping for a wedding. I would like to find a wedding dress; one that has a

story in its threads and is practical for an outdoor ceremony. I don't mind if it is old: stories are carried from person to person, place to place. I would like to find one in Serbia – something 'traditional' – but in London I pop in to a dealer of Afghanistani textiles I know. She takes me to her home to show me her special collection. In amongst the bright colours, tassles and trims, there is a black dress on the rail which calls at me. The long cotton skirt is heavy and full, and the bodice is hand embroidered with tiny stitches in ochre, rust and duck egg blue. The shoulders are narrow like mine, and the sleeves are embroidered with delicate deep red leaves. I slip it on and we both know, this is the one. Its story, whatever it is, fits my body exactly.

I enjoy the search for interesting objects – I encounter worlds I may not otherwise have known existed. In Serbia I continue looking for accoutrements. The film festival staff get behind my quest and send me off with a couple of anthropology students to a place in the hills around Belgrade where replicas of regional folk costumes are made. I come away with a decorative felt waistcoat for Bjarni. Back at the film festival, a city newspaper interviews me about my film, and my search for a wedding outfit. I am sent the article later, but I have no idea what it says.

Just before I return to Iceland, laden with colour and other worlds which I shall weave into that one, I see an email in my inbox from an address I do not recognise. It is Laufey from the flower shop. In broken English, she is telling me it didn't work out with someone else, and the job is mine if I want it. When can I start?

This is ideal. I am energised by my trip, confident that I am still a film-maker even if I am not making one yet. I have the materials – imaginal and real – to begin dreaming a wedding. And now I can begin a life that takes me further inside this small Icelandic village, through a job that I have acquired not by family connections, nor by ability, but by circumstance.

I start as soon as I return home. The shift begins in the *kaffistofa* – the 'coffee room.'

'He would come in here and hang his head in his hands like this,' Laufey explains when I ask what happened with the other guy. 'He had something going on. But he needed too many breaks.'

There is a thermos of sharp, stewed coffee on the table and a foot-long piece of Danish pastry for us to help ourselves to. I am given a name badge, a till card and a contract I do not really

understand.

'Do you know how much the wage is?' I ask Laufey. I learned when looking for work that this is not a question one asks before being offered the job, or indeed accepting it. For work like this, a job is a job and you are paid what you are given.

'I'm not sure. But it's definitely not much.' She does not meet my gaze.

I do not understand how people make ends meet here. Since the crisis in 2008 the króna has devalued massively – to almost half what it used to be. Whenever I make a conversion to pounds in my head, nothing adds up: life should not be possible. What I know is that the average hourly wage seems to be equal to or less than the cost of a hamburger. And yet the international press is always lauding Iceland as one of the wealthiest, most egalitarian nations, with the highest quality of life, happiness quotient, and books read per capita. These are not features that have struck me particularly, but I have not seen any poverty. Either the situation is being misrepresented or the state-sponsored baseline for 'wealth' and 'happiness' has shifted while I was unaware. In my experience though, the mutual support of extended families makes up for other lacks: it is a wealth of a different kind, but not one the governments measure. I have not yet had to buy fish, or lamb, and it is some of the finest I have ever eaten. But to get this I sacrifice a co-habiting partner and must run around on a hill in the snow once a year, chasing after sheep.

'You get a 20% staff discount though,' she adds, smiling.

I remember that this is the reason I applied in the first place, and satisfy myself with the knowledge that everything I have to spend in this store will feel like money back. And I will get to improve my Icelandic in the process. Not only that, but this is the only flower shop in the whole of the Westfjords. I am well positioned, over time, to meet almost everyone who lives here and see how they express themselves with flowers. Finally, they will be able to place me in their world: *Sara Blómakona* – 'Sarah the flower lady'.

Laufey puts me to work immediately. There is no training as such, just learning by doing. I am to keep the refrigerated cabinet of flowers looking good by cleaning the vases and keeping on top of the blooms – trimming them, taking off dead heads and cleaning the stems of slime. If a stem wilts a little I should snake florist's wire up its length to support it. It has taken a lot of energy and care to get these flowers to the Westfjords intact, and their lives

must be prolonged as much as possible. To my surprise, she tells me that most of them are grown in Iceland, in geothermal greenhouses in the south.
The hardest part of the job is learning to use the computerised till. The combination of new words and new technology taxes me and is doubly stressful when someone is waiting to be served.

A woman asks for a bouquet of white lilies, and Laufey nods at me giving silent permission to take it on. I make a perfectly acceptable arrangement, but I worry I am being too slow, and rush the diagonal slicing of stems at the end. I slice a finger and red blood pools from the cut. I try to continue and hope that nobody notices, but some blood drips onto a lily – colour on the blankness – and the customer looks uncomfortable.

'Go and get a plaster,' Laufey says, coming up beside me and seamlessly taking over. Nothing more is said except, 'Just remember to cut away from your body, with the knife.'

As I get more familiar with the tasks, I enjoy the opportunity to chat with people. They seem to know more about me than I do about them – or at least, that I am Bjarni's girlfriend and Haukur's daughter-in-law.

The following day, day two of the job, Laufey asks me to start displaying the new Christmas stock in the homeware section. Meanwhile, she potters behind the counter preparing oasis rings for Christmas wreaths. At midday, folding up her green apron she says, 'OK I'm going home.'

My shift ends at four.

'You're going to leave me alone to run the shop?' I ask in disbelief.

'You're going to make mistakes,' she responds, smiling kindly. 'Might as well get them over with.'

* * *

In November I get a phone call from the local newspaper, *Bæjarins Besta* ('The Best Town'). Apparently, they like to publish features on new residents. Their journalist, Huldar Breiðfjörð, has heard about me and would like to do an interview. I am intrigued: I have not

done anything particularly newsworthy except be here, for a year already. And, judging by the apparent response of the community to my presence – barely a question asked of me *at all* for my first four months, and not many thereafter – I have no reason to believe that anybody would be particularly interested in my story. I agree to have him round, curious as to what has made me suddenly become visible.

'You haven't stayed two years yet,' a colleague at the hardware store told me. 'They want to see that you're staying before they make an effort to know you.'

Huldar arrives at the house one evening after I've just finished a shift in the flower shop. I welcome him into the living room, which I've temporarily transformed into a pop-up shop of jewellery I have made. I have decided to attempt a pre-Christmas 'open house' and invite the neighbours I do not know yet and those I do; put up a poster at the supermarket to expand the clientele. This article may even help drum up some trade. My jewellery making started years ago as a hobby which I then lightly commercialised at Christmastime, for a little extra income. It has an African influence to it, being made mostly of beads I collected in Kenya, which came from across the continent. My necklaces are displayed on calabashes, graceful like the suggestion of a slender woman's neck. I can see from his expression that it is not a world Huldar was expecting to enter when he knocked on the door in this small hamlet. We take seats in opposite armchairs and a subtle smell of Kenya – preservative butter and wood smoke exuding from the calabashes – weaves around the place where we sit.

Huldar is a writer and traveller who has decided to come and live in the Westfjords for a while, for the peace. 'Reykjavík was too intense,' he says. He is typically quiet and reserved – the space between his phrases much larger than the phrases themselves. He sips the tea I have given him and ponders each thing I say.

I find the long pauses both pleasant and slightly uncomfortable. It feels unexpected that the interview is happening in the first place. I was expecting a more standard dynamic of interviewer asks interviewee a lot of questions, but I find myself filling his silences unbidden.

The photographer arrives part-way through the interview with a different energy altogether. I recognise him from the kayak hire place: it's the same guy. He asks me to pose with the jewellery I have made. He clicks and zooms and plays with the lights. In the middle of it all, his mobile phone rings. A few words are exchanged with the caller, even fewer with Huldar.

He says ‘bye’ and runs out of the door. Huldar is unfazed.

‘Is everything alright?’ I ask.

‘There’s a fire in town,’ he says, looking up from his notes with no change in expression.

‘And he’s the ‘breaking news’ photojournalist?!’

‘No. He knows how to SCUBA dive, so they need him,’ Huldar continues, as if that makes perfect sense.

‘Sorry, I don’t follow.’

‘SCUBA divers are confident with breathing apparatus and moving through spaces with obscured vision. The fire service here is pretty small, so for larger fires they need volunteers. Fire and water – it’s all the same.’

*   *   *

Laufey has shown me how to make Christmas wreaths with the rings of oasis she has prepared. We have had a big delivery of fir branches, from Norway I think, the long boxes now stacked on the floor beside the counter. I am preparing the wreaths for orders by laying small sprigs of fir horizontally into the oasis, slightly overlapping, working my way around the ring and holding them in place invisibly with wire. There is a box full of variously coloured decorations to pin onto them. We are going to need a lot of wreaths because, Laufey tells me, people take them to the graves of their loved ones at Christmastime. The longer I spend in this job the more fascinating I find it: I am preparing gifts for the ancestors.

An old man comes in to make an order for two of them.

‘One with pink baubles and one with blue – for my sister and my brother.’ I am tickled by this choice of colours, not only for two adults but two deceased adults. ‘So you’re from *Kenya*?’ he adds.

‘Not from there but I grew up there. How do you know?’

‘I read the article in *Bæjarins Besta*.’

He says he will come for the wreaths later, when he’s done his shopping, and turns for the door.

I remember back to the interview, and Huldar’s comment about SCUBA divers making good fire fighters. I am startled by the revelation living within this matter of fact: to learn to move through, even when I can see nothing. To accept that often things are not what they seem. I am beginning to learn that people *are* interested in me, in their own way. Asking a lot of questions is not the Icelandic way: that would be an intrusion on my own personal right to silence. By being in a newspaper that almost everyone here reads, I have made a large stride on the journey from anonymity into intimacy, with neither asserting their shape on the other.

I take out a large branch of fir from the box and snip it down into small feather-like sprigs. A strong scent of northern forests is released with each snip and my fingers become tacky with sap. A black beetle drops to the counter with one of the fronds. I place it on my palm to look closer. It is motionless: dead or very cold from the journey. It is about an inch long; black with a hard carapace and thick antennae. I place it on the shelf beside the counter.

The radio seems to have been playing the same ten songs since I started working here a month ago, and it is driving me a bit mad. Laufey brings me a coffee and places it on the counter. I didn’t drink coffee before I came to Iceland and now I seem to have at least five cups a day. It’s what you do to interact, even if in silence. The coffee is strong, and as soon as it wears off you need another.

She leans over my shoulder to check my work.

‘What is *that?!’* she asks.

‘A beetle. It dropped out of one of these branches.’

‘*Nú!* We have to call *Nátturustofa*!’

‘What’s *that*?’

‘The Nature...Office, or something like that. They do the researches. This guy is *not* from

Iceland!'

I feel foolish for not having thought more of it. Her reaction confirms my instict: this beetle is an immigrant. It is too big and too bold to belong here. Everything Icelandic I know is diminutive, apart from the people and their jeeps. But I am not familiar enough with island life to know that an immigrant species is potentially a problem. I would probably have let it warm up and walk off into this world, if it's not dead already. A position of caution seems to be the default. Laufey puts the beetle in a small box and goes to make the phone call to *Nátturustofa*.

By lunchtime all the staff have seen the beetle. They have been passing it round in the *kaffistofa.* They come to ask me where it was; how I found it. It amuses me how *this* seems to be what is newsworthy.

Later in the afternoon, Margrét, a stoic checkout assistant with spiked grey hair, walks briskly over to the florist section, clutching one had over a telephone mouthpiece. She is quaking with excitement inside the red blouse of her Húsasmiðjan uniform.

'It's... *RÚV!*' she whispers emphatically, passing me the telephone, her sparkling blue eyes wide with smiling. RÚV is the national broadcaster – the Icelandic equivalent of the BBC. She lingers to see what happens.

I hold the phone to my ear. 'Good afternoon. May I help you?'

'Yes, I'd like to order a Christmas tree for the Ísafjörður branch.'

'One Christmas tree.' I repeat. 'Would you like it delivered?'

Margrét deflates and returns to her post at the checkout.

<u>The Strangest Silence</u>

February 2012

Last night the weather was wild. The sea wall below the house boomed as the breakers heaved their guts over their girth. Lying in bed, I could feel the impact like a distant explosion, over and over and over. The wind's howl was a mournful constant as it coursed ice crystals down the treeless valley past my house, and in a few places, squeezed itself through crumbling window putty in a high scream. Every so often, a gust would slap the air and the house would shudder, the wooden panelling creaking with the jolt. The house's ability to dance with this wind, and the fact that it still stands after 108 winters, reassures me. It is the windows that I worry about, and the objects which, if not well secured, might be hurled through them.

Recently, when Bjarni was home from sea, we went around to our neighbour Ólafur's for coffee and waffles. Ólafur showed us a framed photograph of the village in 1952, taken from an elevated position on the side of the mountain above us. It was summer in the photograph. The steep green sides of the valley, the cluster of red houses at the river mouth looking out onto a flat blue sea, had been hand tinted with colour. He pointed to the old school, almost obscuring it with his enormous finger. 'That winter,' he said tapping the glass, 'the school blew away. The children ran out from underneath it as it was riven from the ground by the wind.' Such extreme facts being delivered in such a casual tone is a habit I am taking time to get used to. More recently cars, and our own wheelie bin, have ended up in the sea during storms. Staying awake can do nothing to deter flying objects. But alert to changes in the wind's pitch, I can brace myself against the potential onslaught of a shattering bedroom window.

Sleep came fitfully as I attempted to achieve some semblance of protection with my thick down duvet; as I tried, and failed, not to imagine Bjarni out on that sea – his trawler a small metal box being tossed around on a seething infinity. 'Many women in Iceland live like this,' I told myself, repeating his mother's words, though they seem at odds with the kind of life I wish to be living.

The next time I awoke, I lay there wondering how Bjarni's door frame-shaped bruise was healing from the last storm at sea. He had not mentioned the incident until I asked, when he

was back home this last time. He had been standing topless at the kitchen sink one morning when I noticed the straight purple lines that extended up both his sides and crossed his shoulder blades. He was doing the washing up with his legs spread wide and his forehead pressed against the cupboard – a stance he assumed to stabilise himself while working in the ship's kitchen, and which he could not shake on dry land.

'Oh that. Yeah it still quite hurts,' he had said, reaching a sudsy hand round to his back.

'*What the hell happened*?!' I had asked.

'Well, the boat was rocking – *a lot.* The only thing I could do was brace myself in the doorway below deck. But the boat jolted, suddenly, and two of my shipmates, Darri and Hákon…100-something kilo guys...they hurled into me. I didn't fall but I did slam into the door frame.'

I placed my hands gently on his skin. It was cold. A layer of fat made of a lifetime of eating fish, lamb, seal and whale, kept his warmth in.

'Will you take a picture for me?' he had asked, smiling. 'It's probably kind of beautiful.'

With my camera I zoomed in on his shoulder blades. A horizon of deep purple seeped downwards into red, like the colours of the sun that doesn't rise but gestures, in midwinter. In its own way it was beautiful, and I might have found it so if it was not such a visible marker of the challenges we are facing in order to have a home together, while the togetherness hardly ever comes. He is absent and in danger daily. To cope, I must try not to think about him and not get too close when he is home.

'It's good money,' my 'in-laws' keep telling me. But at what cost? For reasons I cannot fathom, working on a fishing trawler is considered one of the most desirable jobs to have in Iceland. It's true, it pays the best wage you will get in a rural area – which means most of the country outside of Reykjavík. You get as much free fish as you and your family can eat: a bin bag per tour is the unofficial standard. But you are on shift all the time. Even if you are 'off duty', when a catch comes in it's all hands on deck. I have visited his living quarters – brightly lit, sparse, linoleum covered. A TV in the corner of the kitchen-diner is the only link to the land world. Sleep is grabbed in fragments in a pungent narrow bunk in a tiny room for four. The shower barely works and besides, there is not much time to have one. When I

visited, a row of bright orange rubber dungarees were collapsed around the uprights of industrial white wellies, awaiting action at a moment's notice.

Bjarni is the trawler's cook as well as a fisherman. Because of the resulting double shift, his time off to sleep falls during the only four hours of light that exist in these winter months. He will have a winter of barely seeing daylight. It is hard, dangerous work. The trawlers land for only three reasons: extremely bad weather, landing the catch, and Seaman's Day on 1st June – the only day in the year when trawler crews are legally obliged to have a day off. When bad weather comes, or the catch needs landing, they land at the nearest harbour which does not necessarily mean home. Bjarni's time off is rare, and I will never know when, or for how long, he will be home.

Once, about a month ago, he landed for only three hours. I had to be satisfied with going down to the harbour to grab a kiss – him stinking of fish guts. That time I was lucky: I was allowed to join him on his supermarket spree to restock the ship's kitchen with supplies for the crew. We exchanged news and affection over a filling shopping trolley. A label for 'Icelandic cod' will never read simply to me now, knowing the price – human and ecological – at which it ends up on our plates.

When I dropped him off this last time, we had managed to have a few days together, though he was tired and bruised and the weather was bad. I found those days hard to relax into, as I never knew when the text message would come from his captain – day or night – instructing the crew to return to the boat. Fortunately, it came in the afternoon, so I took him to the harbour. I drove back through the mountain tunnel to our home, to find I had twenty missed calls and a text message that read:

> **My wellies!!!!**

When I called back they had already pulled out of port. In the boot of the car were his steel toe-capped thermal wellies, emanating the putrid tang of his livelihood. I worried that he would be doing this tour in leather lace ups, more vulnerable than usual – no grip, no support, no protection.

I cannot call him once he has left the fjord. All I can do is track the boat's movements on www.marinetraffic.com – a worldwide boat tracking website which surprisingly provides

some solace. Seeing that the boat is moving at a certain speed in a certain direction indicates at least that it has not sunk.

*   *   *

Bjarni is not here and I, and our windows, have survived the night. Marine Traffic suggests he did too. Now, it is still and crystal clear. Here I sit inside my second February, just after 'midwinter' – though it has snowed since October and may continue to do so until May. Munching on some toast in the kitchen, I re-read the *Bæjarins Besta* article with my slightly increased Icelandic vocabulary. The headline translates as ‘The Silence is the Strangest’, a mysterious poetic juxtaposition to the awkward close up of my smiling face below. I find it interesting that of all the words that came out of my mouth in that interview, it is these that the journalist has chosen to summarise me. Not words referring to anything that I might expect residents of this remote fishing village to find interesting: my childhood in Kenya; my career as a visual anthropologist; the fact that I am an English film-maker who has decided to up sticks and live in the Arctic during the aftermath of the financial crisis. But an observation of my response to life here. Perhaps he recognised that this response was more revealing than anything else I mentioned.

I notice how differently I have come to feel about the silence in this short time. I realise that the radio is not on, as it used to be – almost constantly. I feel less need to drown out an absence of something, or distract myself, finding myself strong enough now to be curious about what *is* here. If I do switch on the radio, I do not reach straight for British podcasts to keep me anchored in my former identity, rather listening to the melodic burbling of Icelandic Radio 1, which has begun to make some sense to me now. This channel has been running since radio first came to Iceland and it stops broadcasting daily at just after midnight, leaving silence during the night. During the day, there is little variation in tone in the presenter´s voice between radio documentaries, storytelling, 2 for 1 leg of lamb offers and the obituaries – all offered at a steady pace of just moving through.

At Christmas the anchor reads out messages sent in from well-wishers to loved ones around the country. Soon, between the middle and the end of March, as every year, there will be an announcement that touches my heart: *Lóan er komin* ('the golden plover has come'), marking the beginning of Spring. Though Spring is a tumultuous time of fierce winds and schizophrenic weather, it means we are on the home run to summer, and the return of life. I have come to perceive the *plok* and *krunk* of the raven, the purring wings of a flock of snow bunting, the *diireee* of the golden plover, the drumming of the snipe, and the cooing of eider

as sound markers and companions of the shifting seasons.

Icelandic is a difficult and beautiful language. But I have noticed, as I utter my sentences incorrectly, that much of being understood is about my finding an appropriate pace and cadence for my words; leaving space in between them for other less tangible things to speak. There is much going on in that silence. I am understood better when I do not rush to understand or express everything immediately, as I once might have done. It feels to me that an Icelander, or a Westfjordian at least, cannot thrive any better within a crowded sentence than in a city. I have begun to change shape to see silence as a presence of a different character.

Breakfasted, I go out to the front step and inhale the sea air. It is tight in my nostrils, freezing the moisture within them, and it parches the back of my throat. The sea before me is flat, as if nothing ever happened. It is 11am and has only recently got light, up there in the sky above. The valley floor where I stand is steeped in indigo; the colour of snow in shadow. Today the yellow light of a still hidden sun will only seep a little way down the steep slopes of the mountains that surround me. But the most important thing for me is that it exists at all – a promise of things to come. The raven preens himself, perched on the lamp post at the end of our drive. He is ragged and all silhouette against the blue. He contorts to put himself back together after a rough night. I wonder where ravens go in storms like that. I smile but it hurts my teeth to keep them exposed for too long, so I lick them with my warm tongue and make a mental note to remember to smile inwardly.

The weather is too good to stay near the house, so I grab my oversized down coat, hat, gloves and thermal wellies and head out into the snow, into the valley. Everything is hushed. The soles of my boots creak their tread into the blankness and the sound is improbably loud for one woman's footsteps. Behind the house, I walk across the small meadow making the first trace of the day that will show the village my movements. I stop to look back and admire my sturdy house from behind. The rusting corrugated iron and some of the window frames will need seeing to soon. We have said this many times. Its backdrop is a still blue theatre – the wide fjord from which Bjarni departed into absence. No cars on the road, no people out. They will have left hours ago for work, for school.

I hear a sound from the raven like a pebble being thrown down a well – a sound I had never heard before coming here – which has become a constant to my days. It seems to be made by his beak, but I have never been able to get close enough to see exactly how before he lifts

off the fence, his glossy wings beating a slow feathered ululation. *Plok....plok...*It is loud; the only sound I can make out above the gently sighing sea. It echoes in this stillness, the mountains playing with it. The raven is probably hungry. The rock out front where we leave him our lamb bones and fish skins, will be covered in snow after last night.

I continue up the valley, across the cattle grid and into the zone where the houses disappear, leaving only snow blanketed fields and the trace of the river snaking down its length. A stream flows beside me in a muffled gurgling below the thick snow layer and I make a point of sticking to the track, where I know that what is below my feet is solid. Snow melts first around rocks, whose dark colour absorbs any light there is, turning it into heat. Walking off track is dangerous business.

Above me the colour is golden and azure. The sun's light creeps down the mountain. The tall journeys of fallen scree etched into the snow are thrown into sharp relief. I hear them: rocks tumbling – the freeze-thaw-freeze-thaw coming to its inevitable conclusion. It is a cacophony while it lasts; a sound like the first moments of the world tearing apart, or a tree being felled. But I cannot see any rocks falling. How can something invisible be so loud? Like the mechanics of the raven's *plokking*, the action itself eludes me. All I experience are its echoes and its traces.

I turn back towards home to feed the raven. I walk now towards the village, towards the sea. Finally, as I near the cattle grid, I hear rockfall again. I look up and glimpse a golden spray of snow, like sparks from a welding iron, on the side of the mountain. It closely follows a rock which scribbles an unsteady vertical line down to the valley floor. All it took was a change of position, and a change of light, to see what was happening.

Svartfuglsegg – ‘black-birds-egg’

24th June 2012

1am on *Jónsmessunott* – Midsummer’s night. It is still light, but clouds block the sun. The fjord is calm, as the wind holds its breath between night and day. I walk with Bjarni along the black sand beach, back to our wedding party. We are returning from an unexpected sea swim. I’d told our guests earlier that it was tradition to roll naked in the dew at midnight on this night, for good health in the year to come. Some – mostly Icelanders – have taken it further. How could I not join them? We pass heaps of clothes dotted along the shoreline. Splashes and squeals from naked bodies rupture the sea’s glassy surface. Bjarni’s friend Hákon has missed out this step and waded straight in in his suit, waving his walking stick and spouting drunken enthusiasms. The water is frigid, but it’s invigorating, and I stayed in longer than I expected my body to handle. The bonfires are ablaze to warm us, and the music and dancing continues. It is time to cut the wedding cake. I am wearing only a towel, but nobody seems to care.

On top of the cake are three hollow guillemot eggs: one for me, one for Bjarni, and one for our union. They have been placed delicately in a nest of birch twigs, crafted by my aunty. As she arrived for the proceedings this afternoon, I tasked her with decorating the cake using whatever she could find. All I gave her were the guillemot eggs. Of the many things we have had to think of, and do, to make a wedding in this place possible, decorating the cake in advance was not one of them. She has done an amazing job, especially considering it is actually three different cakes, arranged on a three-tiered stand. Together they are meant to echo Yggdrasil – the sacred Life Tree of Norse mythology, around which the Worlds are arranged.

Two of Bjarni’s many aunties made the cakes, proudly bringing us samples to taste until they had got it right. We were quite happy with the first iterations, but baking being a sign of prowess for people like Bjarni’s aunties, they continued until satisfied themselves. The lowest cake – beetroot and chocolate – symbolises the roots of the Life Tree. My aunty has decorated it with deep pink flowers, made from peels of beetroot centred around a wild blueberry dusted with bloom. The middle cake symbolises the fruits. It is a Black Forest Gateau scattered with berries and shards of chocolate and oozing with cream. The topmost cake symbolises the leaves: a polenta sponge doused in birch leaf syrup. Here the nest of

eggs sits. I admit it is a conflation of Worlds to put guillemot eggs in a symbolic tree, but no more than the conflation of Worlds that our marriage is. It seems to have been evident to my aunty that the eggs need protection. She knows that they are special to me.

I wonder if she knows that these are the eggs of sea birds, laid on narrow cliff edges without a nest, among thousands of other similar eggs. I wonder if she knows what I learned, faced with a cliff full of guillemots in the Westman Islands – those islands off the south coast of this island: that because of their habitat, the mother lays her eggs in a clutch of only one, with a pattern specific to her throughout her fertile life. When she lays her egg, before incubating it, she stares at it to remember the pattern, or to remind herself of it if she has bred before. Once she has incorporated it into her visual lexicon, she may easily recognise her egg amongst the myriad others when she returns to the cliff having searched for food. When I learned this, I fell in love with them all over again, in the way that one admires a great teacher.

I have had one of them since the beginning of my story here. *Svartfuglsegg* – guillemot egg – the most beautiful, strange and perfectly shaped object that so enchanted me on my first visit to Iceland. Natalía had a jar full of them on her studio window sill. The window sill was curated with a display made up mostly of reds and oranges, which seemed to be the aesthetic ambassadors of her Russian nationality, and likely provided some much-needed warm hues during the long blue grey winter. In amongst these warm tones was this inclusion of turquoise eggs – some dark, some light, some almost ivory coloured; all splattered with markings.

I remember spotting the eggs before I had even met Salvar and Natalía, as I waited at their front door to be greeted. They were one of the first things I asked about. I had held them, photographed them. All of them had a perfectly rounded base and sides that rose steeply into an almost-point: a simplified pear shape, a little broader and taller than a large hen's egg. *Svart-fugls-egg,* they told me they were called. 'Black-birds-egg'. They have nothing to do with a blackbird. The Common Guillemot, Brünnich's Guillemot and Razorbill are referred to collectively in Icelandic as *svartfuglar* – 'black birds' – as they cluster together on steep cliffs, their black backs to the wind. They told me that the eggs' long pointed end allows for a tight turning circle, should it accidentally roll from the parent's incubating stance. I drew one in Natalía and Salvar's guestbook as a metaphor for the certainty of my own imminent return. Natalía gave me one from her jar as I left, green-blue, the colour of raw turquoise. It has faded now, but the shell is still speckled and scrawled with an intricate patterning of burnt umber. To me, then, they were as precious and novel as a dinosaur's egg.

When I came to live here two years later, in this place of fjords and mountains and sea bird cliffs, the eggs came into my life again, and differently – the next layer in. Once a year in early June, they begin to appear in supermarkets – an otherworldly and carnal apparition in an otherwise plastic-y branded visual landscape. They are expensive, at least £3 each, because of the hazards faced in acquiring them. To gather them, egg hunters must scale the vertical cacophony of cliff faces where each year these councils of sea birds – guillemots and razorbills, puffins, fulmar and kittiwakes – come to dwell for the summer. Underneath them, the Arctic ocean continues to question the rock's integrity, sometimes gently, sometimes with force. These days the gatherers use safety equipment. *Í gamla daga* – in the old days – they did not have much more than a length of thick rope and took thousands of eggs. These days they have learned, officially at least, that it is not good to take too many. They take them early in the season so that the birds have the chance to lay again, though the second round are weaker and paler in colour; the young less resilient. This seems a poor deal for the guillemots.

One June evening last summer, Gyða and Haukur invited me and Bjarni for dinner: a regular occurrence. It always amused (and bemused) me that Bjarni would ask his mother what was on offer before taking up the invitation. '*Svartfuglsegg*', came the reply. This was a first for me, and not a regular event for him. Haukur had been working away on a construction job in the south of the Westfjords – near to Látrabjarg, one of the largest sea bird colonies in Europe. He was notoriously resourceful and generally did not believe in buying food that existed in the wild. But his hips were not what they used to be, and he had bought them directly from an egg hunter and that was the next best thing.

We arrived to find Gyða boiling a pan of water ready for four blue eggs. Motherly, full-bodied with a face like the sun, she ran the household and her life with generosity and uncompromising firmness. There was nothing else on the table. This would be the meal.

I could not imagine breaking the perfection of that pear-shaped shell to scoop out the insides. Instead I asked if I could drain out the contents, so that at least I would have another shell for my collection; another genealogical map to admire. Gyða set me up on the work surface with a narrow-necked jar. I carefully made two holes: one for the contents to come out, and another to release air locks.

I hoped desperately that these weren't the embryo eggs. I remembered my friend Svetlana telling me in disgust of her Icelandic mother-in-law purring about how much she enjoyed

eating guillemot eggs in which the chick had started to form. ‘Krranchy. Can you facking believe it? She said she likes them because they’re krranchy!’

‘*Nei nei.* We don’t eat them like that,’ breezed Gyða with an air of staunch superiority, somehow without judgement.

‘*Matur!*’ – ‘Food!’ – she shouted as she scooped them out of the boiling water with a spoon. Haukur and Bjarni gathered around the grey formica table: three eggs, three spoons. The Arctic summer light streamed in through all the windows. My draining operation was lengthy. The yolk and white were viscous and strong and I had tried to keep the holes discrete. The others were not going to wait for me. Suddenly I felt self-conscious about being the sentimental foreigner, doing things differently – *again*.

Radio One burbled softly behind Haukur’s shoulder. It had the same soporific quality as the British Shipping Forecast. Haukur was a radio addict as well as a TV addict and was as loathed to part from its waves as some fishermen are to part with the sea. Normally dinner was a radio free zone – a compromise he must have struck with his long-suffering wife years ago, as he knowingly clicked off the dial before each meal began. But this would be a quiet meal and it was tacitly agreed that that it was alright to have it on low.

They ate mostly in silence, punctuated with small short talk, like a dandelion clock catching on a blade of grass, and being blown on again. Gyða clutched her egg elegantly, pointed end down, in her thumb and forefinger, and scooped the white flesh into her mouth with a slow pleasure approaching sensuousness. Haukur usually mashed together his meals – fish and potatoes, lamb and potatoes, or sometimes horse and potatoes – with a fork, or sliced more solid foods straight into his mouth with his pocket knife. He could do neither here. These eggs commanded delicate handling. Bjarni, a nature lover and a food lover, quietly alternated between inspecting the egg with the curiosity of a child scientist and indulging his tongue.

Finally, I gave up on my attempts to eat a drained egg, conceding that there is usually a good reason why things are done a certain way for centuries. I left gravity to work its slow process on an upturned shell, and asked to have a taste of Bjarni’s. My sense of anticipation was conflicted. Something about this felt taboo, like eating a pet.

The egg white was more rubbery than a hen’s egg and the yoke’s flavour more wild. It tasted good – I could appreciate that much. But I felt immune to the layers of appreciation that

must be tied up with having experienced the gathering of these eggs, or having had one's forefathers tell of it: the risks, the excitement; the short-lived bounty of the Arctic summer annually punctuating centuries of hardship. Nine months of the year spent barely getting by, freezing in turf-roofed huts and eating fermented, smoked and pickled foods. This *svartfuglsegg* was one of the first fruits of Summer, and the eating of it was a ritual not to be sullied by any other food. And so we ate, in silence, until only the shell was left – theirs broken and mine whole. This one also now sits in the birch twig nest on top of my wedding cake.

I bought the third egg less than a month ago, from *Kári* the fishmonger. I wasn't expecting to see them in the shop when I went to ask about seafood for wedding canapés, but *Kári* trades also in unexpected extras. Sitting on top of the glass display cabinets, with some bowties made of fish skin, the eggs' colours and shape tugged at me again. They are like worlds stretched into a point at North. I wanted to make a better job of draining one than last time. At Gyða and Haukur's I had made the hole too big as I was embarassed about the time it was taking. This time I took it home to my kitchen, made two small holes and blew. This one rings the brightest of the three, years of blue receding.

* * *

Three years later, Bjarni and I are separated, and I am living in England. I ask him over Skype, '*Hvað er að frétta?*' – 'What's the news?'. His response makes me feel physically sick; giddy:

'Apparently *svartfuglsegg* contain ten times the 'safe' limit of toxins, whatever that means...things like PCBs. They've advised people to stop eating them, especially women of child bearing age, because toxins accumulate in the body and pass to the foetus.'

I think back to that time at Salvar and Natalía's house when I first beheld the egg shells' perfect adaptation to their environment; their beauty; their colours. I think back to the time in the Westman Islands when I began to learn just how intelligent were these birds and their eggs' design. And to that meal where I tasted their wild inside, not knowing that this precious oval of potential life was already poisoned.

My fascination with guillemot eggs would not loosen its grip, long after I left Iceland. The more I learned about them, the more they seemed a fitting symbol of my experience. From

a book *The Most Perfect Thing: Inside (and Outside) a Bird's Egg* by ornithologist Tim Birkhead, I would learn finally that the eggs' pear shape is not primarily for the tight turning circle. Many eggs *do* roll off the cliff. He believes it is to keep the egg clean. The eggs are laid amongst thousands of others, and parents vie for space on narrow cliff edges. Their guano is everywhere, and the eggs become covered in it. The surface microstructure of the shell repels water, and the shape ensures the guano is washed down to the pointed end by wind and sea spray. This cleansing is essential for two reasons. The first is so that the pattern remains recognisable to the parents. The second is that the air cell is at the round end, which is also where the chick's head is when it punctures through to the air cell thirty-five hours before hatching: Life's vestibule. Some hours later, still inside the egg, the chick makes its first distinct peep and the parents respond with their distinct call. Guillemots live in such close proximity that not only must they recognise their eggs, but also their chicks before they hatch.

It is for all of these features – beauty, strength, fragility, intelligence, adaptation and wildness that I wanted them to crown my wedding cake. Had I known they were poisoned would I have chosen differently? Had I known that being able to breathe when covered in shit was more important than occasionally rolling off the edge, would I have chosen differently? Probably not, because the outcome is still beautiful. Something in me must have known this marriage would not be forever. My vows promised only 'for this cycle of time that has been given to us.'

The chick takes a leap of faith before it can fly. Neither chick nor parents will return to the cliff before the following Spring.

<u>*Hvalurinn* - The Whale</u>

October 2012

'*Góðan daginn*', I mumble, shuffling into the dark kitchen at 6.30 am. 'Good morning.'

'*Daginn*', chorus the small group around the table, clasping their steaming mugs of coffee, barely looking up as they gaze out of the window the way that farmers seem to do. It is evidently not worth lighting the paraffin lamps before the sun rises, and I am relieved to have some respite from the oily odour of last night.

We are here at Kálfavík, Haukur's birthplace, for the yearly sheep gathering. The kitchen is spartan: not cosy, but I like it. Gyða and Haukur have renovated this farmhouse with a significant nod to its past, or rather maintaining its original state. For the most part, it sits empty but is used by the extended family during the summer, and for autumn gatherings requiring a large group of people like the sheep round up. It remains off-grid as it always has been. Water comes from a stream running down from the cliffs behind the former farm and electricity is done without. Above the door of each room is a curling yellowed paper sign, hand-written in black marker pen, to show its previous function – *Búr* ('Pantry'), *Stofa* ('Living Room'), and more curiously up in the attic, *Híramíuherbergi* ('Híramía's room'). *Híramíuherbergi* is kept locked and through the keyhole you can make out an old loom almost filling the space, wooden parts poking awkwardly at angles, long since disused. The house has the feel of a family museum, which thanks to my in-laws' hard work, can still be used for gatherings like these.

Gyða gets up from her chair and crosses the deep red concrete floor, newly painted using leftovers donated by Bjarni and I from our bathroom renovation. It is still a little tacky and her peeling footsteps are unexpectedly loud in this dawn silence. She goes to the small annexe whose sign reads *Búr*. She brings out the stack of homemade blueberry jam pancakes left over from the feast last night, for me and the other gatherers to pick at as they arrive. Haukur spreads butter thickly onto his rye bread as usual.

The cast iron diesel range rumbles in the corner. On top of it an aluminium kettle billows steam from its spout. '*Kaffi*?' Gyða offers.

'*Já takk.*'. 'Yes please'. I am annoyed at myself for having left my tea bags at home, but coffee will have to do. Once I commit to one cup I will have to keep drinking it all day to avoid the slumps. Things need to get a lot more desperate before I'll drink Montrose's though – the brand that every farmer in Iceland seems to think constitutes 'tea', and of which they keep a supply for curiosities such as myself. It is as if there has been no evolution in choice or quality since Montrose's was introduced to Iceland in the 1940s, or as if the arrival of consumerism on these shores has largely passed the rural populations by.

The mist on Aðalsteinn's glasses evaporates as he withdraws his mug of coffee from his lips. He reaches over to the thermos of brewed coffee and places it in front of me, revealing a large hole in the armpit of his woollen jumper.

'*Gjörðu svo vel*,' he smiles shyly through his grey beard.

As the head of this weekend's sheep gathering, Aðalsteinn is the first of those not sleeping here to arrive this morning, on time. After yesterday's drawn out and coffee-punctuated start we cannot know when the others will turn up, or when we will finally begin. The gatherers are a motley crew of folk, whose dedication to the task is wavering. Since the last time I helped with a gathering, Hallgarður the *aðalbóndi* has died, and his wife – Bjarni's aunt Yrsa – followed him a few months ago. Her flock at Ögur, the farm neighbouring Aðalsteinn's, has been sold off. The sheep we are gathering today are not connected to Bjarni's family. This is something many of Yrsa's children no longer want to be doing, especially the younger ones who have moved away to Reykjavík. Now it is mostly Aðalsteinn's flock, with a small number of sheep belonging to a woman who is far too old to gather. But Aðalsteinn is no leader, not the keystone that his name suggests. He is shy and pensive and has the air of an intellectual. He has never married and, aged fifty, still lives with his mother. It seems that he is a farmer by happenstance. But a generations-old guiding principle of reciprocity brings the gatherers back. Everybody knows in their gut, even if they have forgotten it in their mind, that it is because of helping each other that we are still here on this rock in the Atlantic.

'No ghosts to report,' I interject into the silence, pouring myself a cup of coffee.

'*Nuuu*? Híramía didn't pay you a visit?' Haukur enquires with a half-smile. He slurps at his mug of *silfurte* – 'silver tea': a mixture of milk and hot water.

I remember the first time I came here Haukur proudly showed me, with a gap-toothed half-

smile, the bedroom upstairs in which he was conceived, and born. The bedroom in which, he told me, the ghost of a criminal named Maríus appeared at the end of his mother's bed and threatened to haunt her if she did not name her child after him. Haukur Maríus Guðmundsson.

He grew up in this house and Híramía was a farm hand who lived and died here. How she died nobody has told me. There is a beguiling black and white photograph of her upstairs: a beautiful young woman perched playfully on a dry-stone wall. She is wrapped in a woollen shawl, her infinite dark braid hanging over her right shoulder like a ladder between earth and sky. She is said to haunt this house. Last night I slept in the room next to *Híramíuherbergi* to see what would happen. I wonder whether the door of her room in the attic is locked to keep people out or her ghost in.

'I had a dream though,' I say, reaching for a pancake.

Aðalsteinn's eyebrows lift above his glasses. '*Nú*! What happened?'

'We were sheep gathering.' 'What else would we be doing?', I think to myself. 'But in the sea, in shallow waters.'

'*Núúú*!' Gyða chuckles from her perch beside the range. It is an exclamation that always strikes me as the sound that eider ducks make as they bob around on the wavelets, especially the way she says it.

'The sea bed was lined with newspaper pages in black and white. Haukur was telling us to pick up all the pages that had pictures on them and cut them out.'

Haukur chuckles and gets up to go to the bathroom.

'Then Bjarni and I were lying in deeper water, on our backs. And behind him a little distance away, I saw a whale breach. I thought: 'if that jumps there's going to be a *huge* swell where we are!'. Suddenly Bjarni froze and told me there was a massive whale's eye right behind my head. Then I woke up.'

'*Nú, jæja*,' Aðalsteinn chirps, stroking his moustache into place with his thumb and forefinger.

I don’t usually remember dreams but this one was particularly vivid. We *are* on a sheep gathering mission, and yesterday we *were* accompanied up the fjord by the exhalations of a humpback whale, so it might seem an obvious set of solid images for my subconscious to dissolve into a dreamscape. But I wonder about the newspapers, and the foregrounded nature of the whale’s eye.

Aðalsteinn leans forward onto his elbows with interlocked fingers, circling his thumbs around each other – a characteristic tick that others impersonate in jest. His dark grey eyebrows furrow into serious reflection. ‘The newspaper pages indicate that something of historical significance is happening. And water means trouble.’

I sit down in front of him, delighted. Not only is he a farmer-poet, he’s a dream interpreter as well!

‘And the large eye means something is watching over you, looking out for your mistakes. Probably your father-in-law!’

It is a relief to have such a connection made by a third party. Nobody can argue with an allegory.

‘*Haaaa*?’ Haukur bellows, striding back into the kitchen. ‘Are you talking about *me*?’

Haukur is characterised by a kind of shyness that prevents him ever revealing his feelings explicitly or engaging readily in conversation with people he does not know extremely well – of whom I am one and will remain so until we have a shared history. Despite this shyness, I have found that Haukur loves being the centre of attention within his own element. It was made startlingly clear yesterday. I have waited two years – two farming cycles – to film the sheep gathering in which Bjarni and his family participate. I have wanted to learn Icelandic, to build relationships with those involved and to participate fully as a gatherer myself, before attempting to document it. The main character was supposed to be Aðalsteinn – the owner of the majority of the flock. But Haukur has seen to it that he is the star of the show, striding into the frame with entertaining antics and wry jokes which eclipse Aðalsteinn’s gangling and introspective demeanour.

I don’t mind. A character is a character after all, but it has left me wondering as I often have,

what story it is I am telling; whose story I am telling? Aðalsteinn is someone to be quiet with, who slowly reveals himself through his thoughts and movements. Haukur is the storyteller, the joker, the player, who saunters into situations like a man who thinks he knows best. Even though I am behind the camera and not a ‘character’, my involvement with this place and with these people does not allow me to be an invisible observer. I am embedded in their dynamics. As I filmed Aðalsteinn arriving yesterday, removing his wellies lined with carrier bags, of course he greeted me and congratulated me on our wedding. Of course I responded. Haukur knows me well enough not to need words to draw me into his narrative. I am beginning to realise I still need to know who *I* am before I know which story I am telling.

Am I talking about him?

‘No,’ I smile inwardly. ‘We’re talking about a whale.’

Seljavallalaug – ‘shieling-field-pool’

May 2013

I cup my hands around the warm ceramic curve of a mug of tea, the steam settling on the wisps of hair around my forehead. I am sitting at a laminate table across from my mum and dad, supported by the firm angular sponge of the campervan sofa. Horizontal rain nails at the large Perspex window which frames a view of fog swirling within a black sand valley, blurring its lines, reducing it to the very barest of details: black, grey, white. Nothing out there is solid, or still, or whole. A dark angle of a slope appears suspended in blankness then disappears again. Light momentarily flashes off a river. The large metal box that has been our home and transport for a week is buffeted by gusts of wind that make clear the superficiality of its shelter.

‘Landscape’ is an insufficient term for places and moments like these: the land seems to have less weight than the sky, and can it even be called ‘sky’ when wrapped in a restless fog? What the window frames is a constant reconfiguration of matter and wind direction. It is a reduction like a well-made broth, rather than an erasure: a concentration of ingredients, each distinguishable and foregrounding itself at different moments. The whole is more than the sum of its parts, but at the same time it obliterates itself. This is a reduction of landscape to an emotional palette: unbridled, unmediated, wild. It is an antidote to the ordered plasticity of the camper’s interior and I want to be out in it.

My parents look tired. I ponder the next move.

It is May 30th, my mother’s 65th birthday. For whatever reason, she has decided to celebrate it by coming with dad from their home in Kenya to visit me. I know my parents are only in Iceland because I am. This is not how mum would choose to spend any day, let alone a landmark birthday. They said they wanted to spend some time exploring a different part of the country to where I live in the northwest, where they have been twice now. We met and picked up a camper van in Reykjavík and now we are attempting to travel along the south coast as far as Jökulsárlón – a glacial lagoon that seems to epitomise the convergence of matter that makes Iceland – or at least its cliché: ice, lava, sea. *This* moment is as Icelandic as it gets – fog, sand and strong wind – but it is not what many people come for. I know it is a lot for them to do this kind of journey, and I am touched by their effort. But they chose to

move to the other side of the world when I was young. They cannot challenge me for having a life that takes me to far-flung places. I know I must embrace their apparent enthusiasm to explore while it lasts.

At this time in late May the summer has not yet quite arrived. No amount of words can persuade those who have not experienced it, how late and how suddenly it comes. Even when it arrives in a couple of weeks, the weather will remain changeable, especially in the mountains. Temperatures in summer can range from around freezing to 29 degrees centigrade. But the daylight lengthening into totality, and the abundant life that comes with it, seems to balance out the extreme weather. The verdant growth and arrival and nesting of migratory birds anchors this island in the familiar reality that life is established and ongoing. In this moment, however, the scene out of the window is undeniably primeval and colourless.

We have only made it a little way along the coast road from the campsite where we parked up last night. As we turned from the campsite track onto the main road we were soon stopped in our tracks by a German tourist in a similar vehicle. He was obviously a seasoned Hymer traveller.

'You cannot drive today in zis van! It is too tall for ze vind speed,' he insisted, hanging out of his window briefly as he continued driving slowly on, presumably looking for a park up himself.

I have only ever travelled around the country in our old Toyota Hiyace van which seems to be able to go anywhere in any weather. I am not used to such mundanities as strong winds limiting my range. But with the German's emphatic protests I wondered if we were being reckless.

There is only one thing to do in weather like this if you do not have a house to retreat to: sit in hot water. Fortunately, I knew that a short way along the road was one of the most strikingly located hot springs in the country – a small concrete swimming pool suspended part way up a mountainside, hanging within the bowl of a valley at the foot of a volcano. Eyjafjallajökull: that volcano which so many people outside of Iceland remember: not for the thick layers of ash that covered the area and forced farmers and their sheep to evacuate; not for the *jökulhlaups* – the catastrophic glacial flooding; not for the toxic gases; not for the visibly disappearing wooden fence posts blasted to oblivion by volcanic ash and high winds; not for the eruption's remarkable beauty and magnitude. These were not the foci of the

international news narratives. Those people remember it because, perhaps for the first time, they realised that natural events could greatly disrupt their well-made travel plans. This fact was irritating, and then forgotten, and life went on as normal.

We are here now, and we can either sit here all day in a rocking campervan, or we can step out into the brooding alchemy of this place. I feel at once responsible for my parents' enjoyment, and aware that it is entirely beyond my control. We decide to go.

'Button up,' I say. 'It'll be worth it.'

I last came here four years ago with Bjarni on our long and ambling campervan trip around Iceland. It is one of the most astonishing places I have ever been. I carry a vivid distillation of the elements which so moved me, as an image, or a place, in my imagination. Though I can barely see five metres in front of me, and the wind carries rain, express, to our downward angled faces, my mind feels sure the destination will be as it was on that still September evening. It is as if we only need step through this veil of fog to get there: a steep-sided bowl-shaped hanging valley, lined with dazzling green moss and grasses, glowing with a golden light. In my mind's image, every detail is clearer than the naked eye can see – a paradox that only makes sense from inside of it: meltwater from the glacier above etches its jagged white cascades all around the curve of the bowl, as if it is leaking from the outside. Outcrops of sand-coloured stone, rounded by time, play with the light and shadow. They assume expressions, becoming faces or statues. Steaming hot water trickles in glistening sheets down a black cliff. Reality is a magnifying lens held up to itself.

I felt, back then, that I had entered a place that was not for mortals; or at least that I should have to strive harder, or be a better person, to be granted permission to access this place. It amused me then, to come across a patch of earthly decrepitude – the charmingly dilapidated concrete swimming pool snuggled up to a cliff and lined with algae, with its even more dilapidated changing rooms at one end. The hut smiled like an old man, missing a few teeth. The holes for windows were still there, but the windows themselves were long gone. A small placard explained that it was built in 1923 by the local Youth Association; that the local council was the first in Iceland to make swimming a part of the school curriculum – safety at sea would be integral to the growing importance of the fishing industry. It stated that this is the oldest operational pool in Iceland. Suddenly the place became rooted in the history of a nation, in a time not so long ago. Places like these rendered the landscapes no less wild or magical, but knitted them into an everyday life and a history of dwelling.

The pool is not sign-posted but I am sure I can follow my nose; navigate by my memories. I remember it being a short hike upstream beside a river then up a mountain path a kilometre or so into this bowl-shaped dreamscape. We tramp alongside the river, facing upstream. I am going slowly but my parents are going slower. My sense of time and distance is amorphous. Everything feels eternal, or outside of time, on days like these.

'Nearly there,' I shout through the rain, not quite believing it.

We continue alongside the river, but I cannot make out a trail going up the mountainside. I don't remember it being far. The map we have doesn't show this place in any detail so there is nothing to check. Usually you pass a few others when going to a place like this – hot water, relatively close to the main ring road, Route 1. We seem to be alone today – nobody with whom to cross reference my memories with reality. Suddenly a figure emerges out of the fog. She is anoraked and clutching a rolled-up towel under her arm. All the signs are good.

'Excuse me. Do you know where the mountain path up to the pool begins? Have I passed it already?'

'Just follow the river – you'll hit it.'

'I don't go uphill? I've been before, and I remember climbing *up* to it.'

She shrugs her shoulders, smiles and walks on.

What can I say? She has just come from the pool. I wonder about the reliability of memories, but at the same time I am certain. On my previous visit I know that I was perched high on a slope, looking down at a river valley.

Sooner than I expect, we reach the pool. It has been spruced up a bit. The old man has had a face lift; a lick of paint. The pool is much the same. *But the river is level with the pool*.

Suddenly the explanation dawns on me: both my memory *and* my present reality are correct, dramatically different as they are. During that eruption which kept people stranded on the wrong side of the world, sleeping at airports; that eruption which forced local farmers to flee with their sheep and later dig their lives back into order, this valley filled with ash. My eyes are looking on a scene and a change which belongs to geological time.

Herring Adventure

The following day, it is better weather, and time to hit the road. Mum and dad seem happier now the sun is out. With the campervan we begin to make our way together slowly north, towards my home, towards my summer self. There are things to do that are tugging at me, and I do not enjoy the feeling of my mind being elsewhere at this hinge of the year. I want to watch the ground waking up in my place, from my front step, as I have watched it in all its lights and weathers through winter. The waking up is so brief, the shift from melt-sodden death to coursing, fecund life so rapid, that I feel I would have to watch many of these start-of-summer hours to piece together some sense of it as a whole reality, rather than a fleeting idea. I imagine a mother feels similarly being away from her child who is about to take its first steps, no matter how many children she has had before. These are the first steps of *this* year's life, and they will have their own stories in them.

This trip with my parents is my 'summer' holiday, before I dive into my summer persona. This brief period in late May/ early June comprises a rare combination of elements conducive to travel: it is a time of relative calm when there is much light in the sky, the roads are clear of snow and blizzards are far less likely. It is a time when, in the south of the country at least, some of the restaurants and museums have opened their doors for the season.

A strange kind of anticipation precedes the arrival of summer. With experience, I can now foresee the activities, responsibilities and ideas that the return of light makes possible. At the same time, I know they will not *all* be possible to enact unless I never sleep. The fullness of life and the ever-presence of light do nothing to make sleep feel like a priority. And so, in these days just before I begin to brim over my own edges, I am on an upswing and it is exciting. But I know that I must work hard to manage it, to circumvent a crash. This is not my light, my land, or my rhythm, and I am continually adapting.

Once I am home and the tourist season starts properly in June, I will become a guide again – two to three coach loads of fifty cruise ship tourists every couple of days, the tour company has told me. I will come to feel the impact it has, both on me, and on the place, but the number of passengers on cruise ships docking at Ísafjörður has doubled in three years. I've seen it in black and white. The tour company send us the ship lists in Spring: 2009 – 28 ships, 15,220 passengers; 2012 – 32 ships, 31,385 passengers. This in a town with a population of about 2,500. My job requires switching between three different languages and trying to tell the same stories in different ways. I do this in an attempt to keep it interesting

for myself, and to resist the commodification of a landscape and culture for which I have so much love – at least my part in this machine. I try to weave the impact of tourism into the stories I tell them, and to answer their questions honestly. I do not love this work – by last September it was already starting to wear thin. One seemingly innocent gesture made me shudder. At the end of a tour, one of my coach passengers gave me a mint from the ship. It had a blue cellophane wrapper with white letters. A stylised polar bear peeked out from behind the letters. They spelled *Bye Polar.* I wondered, as the Greenland Ice Sheet melts, how such an inappropriate thing could ever have made the market, let alone a cruise ship to the Arctic. It troubled me to think perhaps nobody on that coach had noticed. But my options are limited: the potential filming gigs in this area seem to be mostly the preserve of one man who has been doing it for years. Guiding is one of the only jobs available which uses some of my skills. The income will tide me over a little into the unknown of winter.

After the day job is over, I shall continue work on renovating our house and garden while the weather is calm and dry. This persona – and it is a persona: one who performs to the world – welcomes the friends and visitors who come and stay at this time of year; shows them the places she loves. Between it all she tries to be herself, snatching time to give attention to, to be inside of, what the light brings: the cheeping of eider nurseries riding the wavelets like a molten brown island; the sublime stillness of bright nights; the unsetting sun backlighting lupine buds at the point of blooming, their downy coating glowing like a halo. There will be no time to go inward; only to catch the scent of this summer moment before it goes to seed. There is much to prepare to make such outwardness and such stillness possible.

Once we get out west onto the Snæfellsnes peninsular, I feel that I am back in my home range. We are still far from my house, but this landscape is familiar. I can see the distant blue mountains of the Westfjords from here: I know well where I am heading. I have travelled through Snæfellsnes before and spent time in it in different seasons. It interests me to see how it unfolds now into late May. We park up for the night in a cove whose cliffs explode in dark grey basalt roses – a kaleidoscope of striations and joints all arced like a dancer's limbs reaching for the unfathomable. Seabirds wheel around in lemniscates of white and grey, each time bringing food back to their high-perched nests. The teal blue sea heaves through an arch and booms, and booms, through the bright-fogged evening.

We have nothing much that will make supper in the campervan mini-fridge, so I go to the tiny café which clings to the slope above. I step into its warmth through a sturdy door which hushes out the sea sounds. Diners huddle quietly over their meals, clinking cutlery and

drinking coffee from dainty china cups. The tongue-and-groove panelled walls are hung with embroideries, twee from a distance but upon closer inspection reveals itself to be satirical cross-stitch. Lace curtains frame and contain the dynamism of summer's beginning in domestic constancy. I ask the owner if I might buy a fish, if they have one to spare. Yes, just a fish; not a meal. She smiles and gives me a cod from the freezer; asks me what I'm going to make with it. Something with tomato and olives, I think – with rice. Delicious, she says.

She won't take any money for it. It is still May, the tourist season proper has not yet started, and I have spoken to her in Icelandic. These facts affect this moment and her willingness in it. There is still time to be Icelandic – a mode of being in which transactions are not monetised or simultaneous. Help is given if possible now and may be asked for in return later – most likely from another source. Right now, her personal resources are plentiful. She can be generous, and she can know that I am part of a network of exchange on this island. Come mid-June, albeit awkwardly for some, a more capitalist mentality will likely creep in. Or perhaps it is an Arctic mentality of grabbing a bounty while it is here, because you don't know how long it will last, and I am as much a part of it as anyone. Come September, we shall all be exhausted by it, and need time to breathe again.

The next day we drive past the end of the tarmac and continue along the north coast road – a dirt track which remains as all roads in Iceland used to be. At Kolgrafarfjörður – 'coal-digging fjord' – new road building has brought a causeway to cross this narrow, shallow fjord. It makes the journey quicker. Unfortunately, it also makes the sea's breathing slower and more laboured. The structure of the bridge leaves a much smaller gap for the tide to sigh in; for the same amount of sea and its inhabitants to move through, and out again.

As we approach the fjord, our eyes are drawn to the bullets falling out of the sky, silhouetted against the cloud: cross shaped, then suddenly straight. We pull over behind several other cars whose drivers are out clutching their cameras, staring and smiling at the sky. A flock of Northern gannets perhaps numbering more than a thousand is plunging from the sky in darts travelling at 60 miles per hour. The sea thuds and splashes in eccentric percussion as they pierce the surface of the water, diving deep down to retrieve their bounty. I feel, not for the first time, as if I am standing in a time before modernity, when the world teemed with life and humans were sparse. I wonder if this sight is commonplace here or whether a special story is unfolding. My parents are delighted, and our spirits are lifted. We are sharing that thrill of being witness to a natural wonder – something we last shared in Kenya many years ago, watching the annual migration of wildebeest.

When I return home, I wax lyrical about the sight to my in-laws.

'Kolgrafarfjörður? That's where the herring deaths happened last winter. *Thousands* of them,' Bogga responds.

I read up about it and find out that this fjord had been the site of two mass herring deaths in the past year, the cause of which remains a mystery. The fish were found to be neither infected nor under-nourished. It is not known what drove hundreds of thousands of herring into its shallow waters – perhaps a killer whale, perhaps a quest for warmer water. What is known is that the two incidents resulted in the death of around 55,000 tonnes of herring. Apparently, the majority of the herring asphyxiated. The shore was littered with silver carcasses and more sunk to the sea bed. The causeway we had driven across was mooted as being at least partially responsible: its small opening prevented the herring from escaping fast enough into the open sea when oxygen levels became too low. They were forced to use up all the dissolved oxygen in the sea water contained behind the bridge, as the fjord was frozen over. As the national fishing quota for summer spawning herring is around 67,000 tonnes, the articles I read frame these events as a great loss for an economy still built foremost on fishing, though tourism is rapidly taking over.

It is also manifestation of imbalance. The seabirds, whales and seals had a field day at least. Then the rotting began. Local residents had to pull together and bury them to stifle the stench.

I scroll down a news article from December last year:

> 'People are leaning towards the theory of a sudden cooling. It's not the least likely explanation,' Róbert commented, adding he hoped the Marine Research Institute's research would lead to a definite conclusion.
>
> The condition of the herring in the fjord was examined from a boat last weekend. According to www.skessuhorn.is, an immense amount of dead herring was found on the ocean floor but no sign of life.

A photograph of a beached killer whale catches my eye in another article dated a couple of months later:

> A local man Vilmundur Þorgrímsson contacted *Skessuhorn* after seeing photographs of the carcass. 'It is obvious from the photographs that the whale had bad teeth. When the teeth are damaged they can become infected, and the infection can then spread into the jawbone, where the nerve leading to the ears is located. This whale was probably in excruciating pain, which lead him into trouble.'
>
> He speculates that the whale could have been feeding on dead herring which had sunk to the bottom of Kolgrafafjörður, where he was located. In the process, however, the whales wear down their teeth as they are digging in the rocky bottom of the fjord.

I think about the difference between passing through and dwelling; how when one knows and is part of a bigger narrative web of which weather, climate change, species movement, economics and human progress are protagonists, one cannot help but become implicated; one cannot help but care. That moment in which the tourists, my parents and I had stood on the causeway beguiled by thousands of plunging gannets will be captured on their cameras as evidence of Iceland's natural health – an image that Iceland believes it needs to perpetuate in order to attract tourists. But on my camera, now, it is a much more complicated story.

There is another story of which herring are the main protagonists, or victims. The so-called 'herring adventure' is a time in Icelandic history from 1867 to 1968 that Icelanders like my father-in-law speak of fondly. It is synonymous with economic success – a time of plenty. It is also hailed as a shaper of destiny; a period of 101 years which allowed Iceland's modern society to develop. I have seen sepia photographs of boat after boat *filled* with herring – the gunwales almost level with the sea; smiling fishermen aboard, pipes hanging from their bearded mouths. By late 1960, herring accounted for more than half of the country's export income.

The tourism boom is the new herring adventure. The herring adventure narrative does not dwell upon the fact that after years of glut, in 1969 the herring failed to appear and did not return for decades. It will not be addressed until it happens, that the numbers of these economy-boosting tourists will damage the very image they are coming to capture, and then they will go elsewhere. There is not enough oxygen behind the bridge.

To Hell and Back

September 2013

We cruise along the infinity line of a carless road. It is simple: linear, without obstacle – everything that our relationship is not. We are two bodies in the same metal shell moving us in the same direction, but our cells have been reconfigured by this summer. In ourselves, we are not moving in the same direction, nor at the same speed.

The road cuts its hard asphalt course through a vast carpet of autumnal shrubs which stretch to the horizon in all directions. The afternoon sun dazzles the windscreen and suspends us in the reverie that thrives on long journeys.

I wonder why Bjarni is asking me nothing about my summer. I have just been on the most incredible journey: two months alone on foot around Britain, writing for a much-read blog. It has been an opportunity to hear myself; to get closer to remembering where I begin, and he ends. I have asked him about his summer, but there is only so much he can say when he has spent it in a harbour control tower doing 24-hour shifts weighing fish catch.

Trying to balance both our needs after getting married, we are experimenting with a pattern of spending the winter in England and the summers in Iceland. At least, that is the plan. It is not uncommon for Icelanders to spend winters abroad. I won the blog contract in June, only a month after I'd made my seasonal migration to Iceland. As the job required me to walk around Britain it meant we spent the summer apart. I have relished the space more than I am comfortable to accept.

Bjarni's mobile rings, jolting in us into the present.

'*Sæll og blessaður faðir vor!*' greets Bjarni to his father, changing gear, steering onto the roadside and slowing to a halt all with a deft one-handed movement, the other hand pressing the phone to his ear.

It makes me smile every time that Bjarni calls his father *faðir vor* (Our Father). It is one of many family in-jokes made at the expense of the church, the state, or people's characters, but never with any unkindness. It seems to be an integral part of their not taking life, or

themselves, too seriously. I have followed suit by calling him *Tengdafaðir vor* (Our Father-in-law).

'Listen, Bjarni. Are you still looking for a wood burner?' Haukur crackles down the phone. He seems to believe mobile phones work like walkie-talkies and his crowing can be heard within a meter radius of the handset. I can picture him at home 700 kilometres west, lying on his corner sofa in front of the TV, in his stained blue work trousers and chequered flannel shirt that smells of oil and ageing man, proud of the knowledge he is about to impart.

Bjarni looks at me, eyebrows raised, reiterating the question with his face. 'Sarah are we still looking for a wood burner?'

The sun blazes through the dense jungle of wiry ginger hair that is his beard. It glows orange. He claims it is the Celt in him, while his dark blonde hair is the Norwegian bloodline. He is still handsome, but changed. He, like all Icelanders, is from so many places. Yet, one winter away from his country and back in mine, dealing with a long-held but only recently acknowledged depression, has scarred him. Or perhaps it is the venturing out of his comfort zone – marriage, compromise, having to prove who he is in a new terrain, rather than being born of it. Something of his fire has gone out.

'Maybe,' I concede. I have always wanted to have a crackling fire in our living room – much more alive a presence than electric heat. This is an unusual possibility in Iceland, there being so few trees. But we own one of the handful of remaining houses with a functioning chimney. As Haukur is able provide us with a constant supply of offcuts from his joinery workshop, it is a real possibility. The detail is that we are not planning to be living in the house in winter anymore. The unspoken detail is that we are still holding on to a marriage that is broken.

'*Kannski*,' Bjarni relays. 'Maybe'.

'There was one outside Péturskirkja last time we went there, just inside the ruined enclosure. You'll see it.'

'Péturskirkja?'

'Yes. It's not actually a church. It's a white house on the lava on the road towards Askja, not far from the turn off from Route 1.'

We are at the northern edge of the vast expanse of rocky desert, wind and water which makes up the uninhabited heart of Iceland. We are heading to Askja anyway – a caldera – to visit a warm opaque turquoise crater lake that pools at the bottom of it. It is named Víti – 'Hell'. Our marriage teeters on the edge of oblivion, paradoxes existing inside us that we can barely contain, nor know how to navigate. On the other side of trust, we have found disillusionment. At the bottom of promise: despair. Inside empathy: dissonance. And behind so much light, the shadow. After what we've been through recently, a little road trip to Hell and back seems a fitting way to mark our reunion.

*   *   *

'What so we're just going to go and take it?' I query, as we continue on.

'If it looks like nobody is going to do anything with it, and it's been there for a while, then maybe, yeah,' Bjarni defends, though I needed no persuasion.

His father Haukur is notorious for being constantly on the prowl for free treasure, particularly things from 'the old days' that are no longer valued by many Icelanders. Bjarni and I are of the same ilk: it feels like a moral obligation to rescue these relics from potential obscurity. Our house is now filled with furniture, paintings and fittings gleaned from the municipal skips, charity shops and flea markets, and Haukur's garage is equally full of scavenged delights. Once, he took me in there and showed me a beautiful – if slightly battered – antique child's bed, adjustable in length as the child grew. 'Where did you find *that*?!' I asked him. 'Blowing about in the wind in Bolungarvík,' he joked. 'You may have it when you have your first child.' I am particularly impressed, though, at his knowledge of a potential haul many hundreds of kilometres from where he lives. Our journey has suddenly taken on a delicious taste of Mission.

We have spent the most part of the day crawling around on our hands and knees inspecting small pockets of the vast tundra, ablaze with the colours of autumn. Each hour of sunlight cast by summer saturates the hues of the landscape, drop by drop. Swathes of luminescent red blueberry ling jostle for space with the jagged yolk-yellow leaves of dwarf birch. Up close, each fingernail-sized blood red blueberry leaf, backlit by the glow of afternoon, is traced with yellow veins. It is like looking through closed eyelids at the sun. At their feet, lush green forests of moss, open fans of alpine lady's mantle and purple blooms of wild creeping thyme are knitted into a carpet, ready to catch the leaf-confetti as the temperature

drops into winter. Anyone who believes that Iceland lacks colour would be forced to eat their words in autumn, if they ever managed to close their awe-struck mouths again.

Autumn is by far my favourite season, infused with the accumulated energy of summer and tinged with the melancholy of the turning in – the acceptance of the long hard journey of winter ahead. It is a time to go home, to nest and create. Instead we are on a knife edge: together or not, England or not. Either way, with no idea if we can find happiness any time soon. We are on a detour into No Man's Land, a last jaunt on our way home to pack up our things, to try living in England together for one more winter. Or not.

I love this landscape as much as I love Bjarni, though each seems as indifferent as the other. Bjarni's indifference hurts me much more deeply. No matter how much I try to rationalise it – 'he is ill, he is hurting, he is emotionally impotent right now'– I *am* hurting. I have found my fire again and do not want to let him put it out. Nor do I want to feel I have not tried everything I am able to before giving this up.

For now, we turn inland, towards Askja, towards the desert: the interior where nobody can live. It is accessible by normal vehicles only in summer – that momentary suspension of elemental extremes, replaced by a rapid transformation of matter: snow melts; meltwater gushes and drains; rivers fill and flow. There is not time for much growth to take hold on the dark lava sand, except the occasional miraculous pink mound of moss campion, and tussocks of lyme grass whose delicate network of roots attempt to hold this fragile terrain together. The crowds of tourists come curious to penetrate it, to feel they have been to the furthest corner of the earth, and leave again soon after. Now in September few tourists will be left: autumn's chest is fully inflated ready to breathe out the winter at any moment.

Quite soon we notice a single white house with a bright red roof, perched on the lip of a lava field. Péturskirkja. It is an extraordinary juxtaposition: a microcosm of domesticity in the vastness of this raw landscape. We draw close. Propped against the house is a ladder; one old man at the top and another at the bottom. They are giving the building a lick of paint before the winter comes. The house is little more than a concrete room with a roof – a shelter probably used during sheep gatherings. Certainly, nobody lives in it. Given that we have come on a 'foraging' mission, the men's presence is slightly inconvenient.

We pull up in front of the house, which now stands above us on a cliff. One of the men saunters over to the edge in paint-spattered overalls, brush in hand. He looks down at us, his

woollen hat askew on top of his bright white hair. His broad shoulders give him an air of guardianship of this place, like a priest at a pulpit.

'*Góðan daginn*,' we greet him, searching our minds for a different reason to be here than what could be deemed as potential thieving. 'So…you're painting?' Bjarni stalls. I know that, as a rule, they will chat about the weather and where we are heading, which will give me more time to think of an excuse. A radio burbles in the distance.

'Yes, we are. A freshen up. Before the weather turns bad. Though that may happen sooner than we expected.' The man squints into the sun as he turns to gaze into the far distance, as if he might spy a clue as to its ETA.

'*Núúú?'* says Bjarni. 'What's the forecast?'

'There's a storm coming tomorrow morning or possibly sooner, and they're advising people to leave the area.'

We have talked about doing this trip for years. It is painful how close we are to the lake: we cannot turn back now. Though I also don't want to be one of *those* people, who at least once a year makes the headlines by getting into trouble ignoring safety advice and putting others' lives at risk who attempt to rescue them. Sadly, they are most often tourists.

'We're heading to Askja. We *really* want to make it. Do you think it's OK to continue?' I ask, slightly rhetorically.

If we, or Icelanders in general were risk-averse, they would say 'absolutely not'. But they and we are not. In this moment the storm has not yet come and may not come for some time. So, he answers with the classic response that at once throws responsibility back to the questioner and to the gods:

'*Já. Er það ekki*?' ('Yes. Is it not?').

Bjarni and I look at each other and smile, then look again at the man. When this is said, it is implicit that you are both agreed *in that moment* but aware that the situation might change to make all involved review the judgement call – though nobody will be considered responsible. It is a phrase that is as good as any at summing up an Icelandic approach to

decision-making, and one that I learned early on.

‘Would you like to come in?’ he invites us.

‘Actually, that would be great. Would you mind if we eat our picnic inside?’ It is already past three o’clock and we have been too absorbed in the worlds of vegetation underfoot to think about lunch. And it gives us a ‘reason’ to be here that is not foraging wood burners.

‘Help yourself.’

We climb up some steps chipped into the cliff and greet the man who is up the ladder.

‘I need to carry on here but make yourselves at home.’ The white-haired man strolls over to join his colleague.

We lay out our picnic on the long table: rye bread, gouda, and lettuce and tomatoes grown in geothermal greenhouses in the south country. The small, whitewashed room is lined on three sides by bunk beds, and a wood burning stove stands in the corner beside an opening onto a tiny kitchen. This is a sheep gathering hut for sure. We sit in the pool of sunlight streaming through the window, able suddenly to feel its warmth now that we are sheltered from the well-travelled wind of the plains. We might have thought it a good idea to press on, having learned of the imminent weather change. But there is something perverse that seems to happen to time in Iceland. When needed – *really* needed – speed, efficiency and stamina can be mustered, almost as if by magic. But until that point, a laid-back approach is the status quo. In this moment, the weather is good, we are hungry and there are still five hours of light left.

We enquire about the wood burner on our way out. We are glad to hear it has been taken away to be restored and will be used. Haukur will also be pleased and accept it as a valid reason for us to come home empty handed. I am touched to have been able to spend a while in this insertion of colour, shelter and humanity, in the everyday of some residents of the sparsely populated north, before we head back out in our van into the grey desert.

The flat horizon of charcoal grey lava sand is stuccoed with rock of the same colour; hewn, chiselled, sculpted and smoothed by wind and lava fragments – a rasping tongue which licks protrusions of rock into shapes of its own imagination.

We journey across the surface of the earth, its curve almost perceptible; the only measure of distance covered being a single volcanic cone moving slowly closer, then passing us. The wind picks up and sands the paintwork on our van a little more with each kilometre. It is a beat up old thing anyway. There is no point in anything else. Ahead of us, the clouds gather and darken their underbellies. A light rain starts to fall. Mercifully, it settles the dust and makes the rocks glisten in the lowering light.

At last we reach a river. The water and the green ribbon of vegetation that follows its course is like an apparition. Globed stems of mature angelica poke this way and that, and shrubs of willow tumble around their feet. The river is clear and steady now, not mixed with snowmelt and turbulence as it would have been earlier in the summer. Its name is what it is: Jökulsá á Fjöllum – 'the glacial river in the mountains'.

We stop the van and climb out to listen to its gurgling, to relish this sudden band of life. Bjarni skims stones. I harvest angelica seeds. We are well practiced at silently, together, knowing when the point comes that it is time to move on. We climb back into the van, and Bjarni expertly fords the river as he always does – slow and steady – the water reaching part way up the doors. He switches on the radio for an update. It whines and crackles a little now that we are some way into the interior, but we can make out some words – Bjarni more than I.

'Oh,' he says.

'What?'

'The storm might come as early as midnight. I think we're going to have to go to the lake this evening, so that we can leave first thing tomorrow.'

When you are in a hurry and know that you will have to retrace the very same route only hours later, time passes very slowly. We drive on, in silence, my heart starting to race a little. Bjarni doesn't do turning back, and in this scenario, nor do I.

Finally, we arrive at Hell's camp site where there are two wooden huts and a camp ground empty of tents. A triangular metal toilet hut lies on its side, and nobody is to be seen. There are a few four-wheeled drives parked along the track. We make our way to the warden's hut. He has seen us coming and opens the door to his warm, sheltered space – his home for the

summer months.

‘Good evening’, he says. He is handsome; wholesome looking. He is wearing a grey Icelandic jumper and smoking a pipe, as if he is enjoying his country persona for the last days of the tourist season before returning, as most do, to his Reykjavík winter life. ‘Are you staying the night?’

‘Yes, in our van,’ I chip in.

‘That’s easy then. I’ve asked all the campers to stay in the huts tonight because there’s a storm coming.’

‘Yes. We’ve heard.’

‘Coffee?’

‘Thanks…Think we’re going to walk to Askja before dark, so we can leave first thing if needed.’

‘Not a bad idea. You’ve got about an hour and a half before it gets properly dark.’

It is only recently that real darkness has become a possibility – true night finally becoming part of the daily cycle as the sun arcs southwards in autumn. Summers in Iceland are spent looking forward to this darkness, and when we least need it, it comes.

‘There are some yellow markers on the trail, so you should be able to find your way in the dim.’ He raises his pipe in farewell and steps back into the warmth of his hut, closing the door. The smell of pipe tobacco stays with us for a brief moment.

We make off up the path leading from the campsite, hoping it will not be too far to the lake, and knowing in the back of our minds that this is probably not the right time to think about swimming in it, though a bathe in a hot lake is exactly what we need. I am cosseted in my usual attire for any activity that involves being outside – which seems to be most activities, at one point or another: thermal underwear, jeans, an Icelandic jumper, a big down jacket, a woolly hat, woolly gloves and thermal welly boots. Bjarni usually wears a slightly less practical version of this outfit, and has been known to wear a suit for a hike up a mountain.

This time at least he has a coat, though his charity shop trainers are not the most appropriate footwear for the task.

My wellies thud purposefully. We are not used to walking this fast on an adventure. Our walks usually take the form of a meander with a loose destination, and the possibility to lose ourselves in small details on the way – like the bright lichens creeping across a rock face, or the crystalline sulphur frillery around a geothermal vent. At first our steps are a solid crunch on crumbs of metallic black lava, like a sea of very burnt toast. As we round a hill the landscape opens up into a bowl that scoops down towards the caldera's edge. Gravity and urgency pull us faster. Suddenly I feel as if I am bouncing. Each footstep rings in a way that my ears and brain struggle to fathom. The ground beneath my feet seems to be hollow. Are we in fact walking on a fragile crust thinly veiling a massive dormant magma chamber?

As the warden said, there are yellow plastic markers with fluorescent strips – the same kind that mark the edges of Icelandic roads: double strips for the left edge and single for the right, in case there is so much snow or fog that the road itself becomes invisible. They seem conspicuous here, but they are useful for getting us quickly to our destination. We begin to run. The wind picks up a little. My thick-soled rubber boots spring on the rubber earth. The black ground becomes darker than the sky though it is the sky that is darkening. We are running towards something that we should be running away from. Everything is surreal: I feel as if I am inside a dream in which I have died. Is this what Hell is like and is that where I am going?

We reach the upward slope of the bowl and run up it, bent forwards into the wind. We stop on the ridge and are almost instantly knocked over by the strength of the gust. We cling to each other and glee in the sheer force of it, our bodies suddenly as unstable as feathers. Our eyes squint against the wind and its cargo. Through the sand gathering on our eyelashes we can make out the oval form of the lake, bright in the dim. We hold hands and turn our backs on the wind, leaning into it at forty-five degrees. *This* is being alive. *This* is why we are still together.

Clambering down the other side of the ridge towards the lake gives us some shelter, and the calm to drink in this scene. Víti: a still, oval pool the colour of opal at the bottom of Askja, a black rock bowl; like a gemstone in a raku-fired chalice. Beyond the bowl is a much bigger lake of darker teal blue, choppy as the storm mounts. It is the tipping point of evening. As the darkening sky soaks into the blackness of the sand, Víti appears to luminesce. It is as if

this is the place on earth that is light's own home; the place to which it returns at evening time, draining from the hillsides in a daily migration. I wonder how many people have ever seen Víti at this time of day, in this season. Was it not for the coming storm we also would not have witnessed this miracle.

The time comes where we know the window to return is as small as it can be. Again we run, bouncing across the hollow earth, making out each yellow marker from the one before, until the path to the campsite comes into view.

*   *   *

During the night, I hold Bjarni tight as the wind rocks the side of our van violently. Occasionally he lifts himself onto his elbow, and looks out of the window, as if it will narrow our chances of being blown over. We have parked in the most sheltered spot we can, so all there is to do is hope. I imagine I am at sea, so that I might find the movements of the van more relaxing. Sleep, like the wind, comes in gusts.

*   *   *

In the morning, people in brightly-coloured anoraks emerge from the main hut, one at a time, running to their cars with luggage and straight back to the hut again. The bed is empty – Bjarni must have braved the toilet. One man comes to put some bags in the jeep next to our van. I see him open the vertically hinged door to his boot and run off to get more luggage.

'Idiot!' I curse.

It is a ground rule I learned early on: hold onto doors in strong wind, or just keep them closed. When he returns I knock on the window to get his attention. I am worried for him, but also for our van. We are in the line of fire. I knock and gesticulate wildly at the window, but he cannot hear me. Finally, I take the plunge and get out. It is not the weather for pleasantries.

'Excuse me!' I shout from within my hood, having to tap him on the shoulder to be heard. 'You mustn't leave the door open. It might rip off.' He looks at me, bemused. He must think I am vastly exaggerating. 'This is really strong wind! A loose door is bad for you and for us.'

Admittedly, you never hear of such stories on the continent, and this is still Europe after all. But he probably hasn't lived in a village where cars have been blown into the sea. Besides, the evidence for my caution blows around us. He slams the door shut and runs back to the hut.

Though it is wild, the wind does not feel as malevolent once standing on solid ground. Bjarni strides across the car park. 'That was fun!' he smiles.

'What, the toilet?'

'Well, yeah, but also there's a gorgeous gorge just behind the camp ground. It looks most intrrriguing.' Bjarni rolls his 'r's more than anyone I know, and can make anything sound intriguing because of it. 'Shall we have a little walk?'

I consent with a smile. I love this about him also: his ability to hold a calamity at bay and focus instead on something wonderful right in front of us. Again, the apparent urgency of our departure is postponed because of a more urgent tug in the present: our shared inability to turn down opportunities for moments with the sublime.

'I think we need to protect our eyes. There's loads of pumice blowing around in there,' he adds.

And so it is that, like the mad creatures that we are, we make our way up the gorge wrapped in jackets and scarves and with our eyes protected by Speedo swimming goggles – mine a blue-tinted plastic, as if the scene was not surreal enough already.

It feels like borrowed time, as if we have been turned away from Hell and asked to come back later; invited to explore its waiting room in the meantime. The gorge is an intimate topography of jagged steep sides; nooks and crevices that arrange themselves into expressions on the faces of trolls. The wind funnels through it. Flying specks of pumice sting my face, and I can hardly convince my brain that with goggles on, I do not need to squint. A river courses through a pebbly river bed perhaps six metres wide, pausing here and there in sheltered pools where it whirls in eddies, not wanting to stop, like a jogger at traffic lights.

'*Sko!'* beams Bjarni, pointing at one of them. 'Look!'

I crouch for a closer inspection. On the surface of the eddy, floating crumbs of pumice ride this perpetual spiral. They look like Rice Krispies drowned in milk. The crumbs line up flank to flank, buoyed by the flow, until they hit a patch of confusion, then find their way onwards again. It mirrors the course of our marriage, and I long for the 'onwards'. Our eddy has lasted just about as long as I can manage. Tugged by Bjarni's playful curiosity, I flit between my adult internalisations and a present state of mind like a child with her playmate.

To Bjarni it looks like an enormous flock of sheep being rounded up, seen from the sky. We imagine that we are giants looking down on this sheep gathering of his. It is a tiny happening in a foot-square pocket of this earth. We have decided not to run from impending chaos, but to stay and witness it; to find space within it. We shall return to England for the winter, together.

The Raven's Nest

August 2014

Bjarni and I have overwintered in England, living in a rented house and getting jobs: a last-ditch attempt at saving our marriage. It did not go well. He finally moved back to the Westfjords in May. Now I'm back here too, briefly, to figure out how to deconstruct this life we shared; how to weave together the fragments of places and relationships into something that might serve me now. Our house sits frozen in time, full of our things as we left them last summer, but with neither of us living in it. I am safe now, but I am in pieces; adrift.

What am I to this place, these people, Bjarni's family? Am I a tourist now? What do I do with this experience when it has changed my shape?

Bjarni lets me borrow his car. I take a drive through the mountain tunnel to Bolungarvík, without any particular agenda. This journey is body memory: the route I drove for more than a year, back and forth through the tunnel, to drop Bjarni off and pick him up from his fishing tours. For the moment, it represents to me my enabling of a situation I did not want. I'd like to recast this memory, these memories, into something new or revelatory.

I realise this is a very Icelandic thing I am doing: going for a drive for no particular reason. It is called a *rúntur* (a 'round') and kids start doing it as soon as they get their driving licence. A more extended version of this which might come a little later in life is called an *óvissuferð* – one of my favourite words – an 'unknown journey'.

I emerge into the daylight. I feel like going to the top of the mountain, Bolafjall, which fills my windscreen. The view from there is astonishing: the kind of view that puts things in perspective. You can see across to the intricate fjords and mountains of Hornstrandir – one of Europe's 'last wildernesses' – and out into the open sea. You can imagine, but not quite see, the abandoned villages. People say you can see Greenland on a clear day, but I never have. You can watch the trawlers and small fishing boats cruise slowly across the broad blue vista of Ísafjarðardjúp, humming like bumble bees drunk on nectar.

At the top there is a signboard that I translated into English for the Sheriff of Bólungarvík, Guðjón, about the history of the NATO radar tracking station that sits, also abandoned, like

a giant golf ball on the wildest of courses. I remember being struck by the text's opening, not least because it was my first introduction to *Fata Morgana,* a complex mirage that appears to float landmasses in the sky:

> **You are on Bolafjall at 625 metres above sea level.**
> **The earth you stand on is a part of the Westfjords high plateau,**
> **which came into existence more than 14 million years ago.**
>
> **It is commonly stated that Greenland is visible from here in clear weather.**
> **In fact that is not possible unless a strong fata morgana lifts the glacier's**
> **image above the horizon.**
>
> **Around 25 million years ago Iceland and Greenland were connected. When**
> **the continents drifted apart, their edges sank bit by bit into the ocean and**
> **Iceland became an island.**

It has a lazy summit: because of this radar station there is a four-wheel drive track, though I'm not too sure about risking it with Bjarni's car. Perhaps I'll see if Guðjón fancies a jaunt. He'll have a jeep – most people do. I'll try and find him later.

For now, I pass the expanse of gravel where the Arctic terns nest and brood all summer. It is several years since the shrimp factory dumped a mass of shrimp shell there, knowing it would work well as a fertilizer. Vegetation is beginning to take hold. The terns – *kría* – hover, swoop, *kriiiiiii* and click, ferociously guarding their young. They are preparing to leave for their epic southward journey.

Bolungarvík looks just the same as the day I left. Life goes on in this small fishing village of nine hundred inhabitants, clustered around the outermost tendril of the national road network, just south of the Arctic Circle. The gutting sheds, the wholesale fish market and the weighing ramp curve around the harbour, where the trawler *Valbjörn* is offloading its catch, which Bjarni will weigh and record. I wave as I pass Arngeir, Bjarni's father's best friend – the one who towed their summer house, floating, across the sea. He is smoking a pipe outside one of the gutting sheds, clad in bright orange rubber dungarees and a plastic hair net. The few wide streets lined with concrete houses extend behind the harbour until abruptly the wild, treeless valley begins. Not many people are out and about, though it is summer.

My car draws alongside a golf buggy which is humming along the cycle track, travelling faster than I am. A shaft of sunlight cascades between two mountain peaks onto the golf course where a man tees up a shot, dwarfed by his surroundings.

I hang a left to where I think I'll find Guðjón.

Nátturustofa – The Nature Bureau – and The Natural History Museum, are housed in a characterless pebbledash block upstairs from the tiny, cramped *Samkaup* supermarket, which I have frequented many times. I smile as I recall how the trollies are provided but ill-advised. In the narrow aisles the villagers briefly cross paths with, and crash into, docking fishermen coming to stock up with Coca-cola, meat and a few withering vegetables for their next tour. Once upon a time Bjarni was one of them and I was one of the 'villagers'. His stocking up shopping trip was sometimes the only time I saw him in days. On Bjarni's boat they never ate the fish they caught. Every day and every night: trawl, haul, gut, pack. 'How can we eat it too?', he said.

Upstairs in the *Nátturustofa*, it is the inverse of downstairs. The end of August is already the end of the tourist season. It is clearly not worth paying someone to be on the museum entrance desk: I am probably the first visitor of the day. The door buzzes as I enter, which prompts a man behind a glass partition to come through into the one room museum. I can see it's Luca.

I know Luca, a little bit. He is one of the other foreigners here who became entangled first with the place, and then with an Icelander. He more than some has found his groove – almost a career – working here at the *Nátturustofa*.

'*Hæ Hæ*. Is…Guðjón in?' I ask him hesitatingly. There are few enough people in villages like this one that it mostly suffices to mention a first name for anyone to know who you are referring to.

The co-ordinates in my mental map of people and institutions I may need have placed him here, but I cannot recall their source. I never found that anything was made particularly obvious or accessible: it was the incomer's job to ask the questions and to know which questions to ask. Signage is discreet. It is assumed that everybody just *knows.* Locals *do* know. My map has had to be created, and constantly revised, from snippets of information gleaned and linked up – as I've learned Icelandic and met more people; paid attention to

details in their conversation; learned what questions to ask. It has felt like discovering and recording an archipelago of sense, island by island. Sometimes an island turns out to be a mirage.

Luca saunters towards me.

'*Sæl og blessuð*!'

He is handsome and full-bodied; Italian but with a round, dark-stubbled face, more Latin American-looking somehow. His eyes are warm when he smiles: the creases around them break into a volley of arrows pointing towards the kindness in the dark brown depths of them.

I feel bad for not having greeted him properly first, leaping straight to my new-found agenda to find the Sherrif to take me up the mountain. I know my omission is a response to an Icelandic peculiarity that I have never got my head around. Approaches to greeting have always struck me as fickle: one moment I might be treated like a long-lost friend; another I might be ignored in the street. The result is that I never know quite where I stand with people. When it happens, the greeting '*Sæl og blessuð*!' for women or '*Sæll og blessaður!*' for men means '[May you be] Happy and blessed!', which is no small wish for someone. Currently I feel anything but. I've learned not to take the blanking personally, not to read into it: everyone has their story and their norms. But it means that sometimes I am less friendly than I might be, in a bizarre attempt to fit in by being similar. It feels even more unnatural now that I have been back in England a while, surrounded by mannerisms I only noticed when I left them. Today is a 'long lost friend' day, it seems. I am relieved: I need it.

'*Sæll og blessaður!*' I reply, remembering to accentuate the '*ll*' for the masculine. I was surprised by how my Icelandic began to flow as soon as I landed, eleven months since I last spoke it. It was if a pause button had been pressed since last summer and the words had been waiting to come out. But what will I do with them now, all these words in my body that only make sense here? Where will I put them in England?

As much as I enjoy this flow, it feels slightly forced that we two foreigners are communicating in Icelandic when we can both speak much better English, so I am glad when he continues:

‘Guðjón? His office is across the road, by the bank. It’s open 1.30 to 3.30, Tuesdays and Thursdays. So, no luck today.’

‘Hah! He’s in work for *that* long?!’ I jest.

Once I stopped being irritated by the opening times here, I was amused and touched by them. Their complexity took up a lot of brain power when I was first trying to establish myself. Like the weather, no timings seemed constant or consistent. And I quickly discovered Icelandic Google only co-operates if you have the word for the thing you are searching for grammatically correct. As every word and every name changes depending on what is happening to it, this is a tall order for a language learner. The result was that I could not research opening times without going to the place anyway. But I came to appreciate what these ‘irregular’ opening times demonstrated: that work is not everything, or at least that everybody does several jobs. They cannot give themselves to only one thing: the Arctic does not function like that. An existence is forged out of multiple improvised solutions. That is how existence should be; I have learned that much. That is the shape of resilience.

‘The Natural History Museum’: it is a grand title for a yellowing collection of birds’ eggs, poorly executed taxidermy and the enormous disintegrating jaw bone of a Blue whale, wrapped in cling film for now, to keep the brittle fragments from falling to the floor. The cases full of birds are reflected in the polished grey lino, rippling slightly like a boat reflected in almost still water.

‘Why are you looking for Guðjón? Are you getting a divorce?’

I am caught unawares by such a forward question from someone who is ultimately not much more than an acquaintance.

‘Actually I am.’ I realise this is the first time I’ve said the words publicly. ‘But that’s not why I’m looking for Guðjón.’

My throat tightens then snaps and my eyes pool with tears.

‘*Oii* sorry! I didn’t realise. I mean, I thought you and Bjarni split up ages ago. It’s still fresh, huh?’

All I can do is nod. I feel like a little girl.

‘I’m *so insensible*! What’s the problem then? Are you pregnant?’

At this point I have to laugh as well as cry.

‘No! I’ve just put on a bit of weight, maybe.’

‘God I really should shut up. Erm...You want some coffee?’

‘That would be nice actually, thanks.’

His shoes squeak across the floor as he disappears behind the glass door to the Bureau kitchenette. I stand alone amongst the stuffed *fulmar* and the *svartfugl* eggs, admiring their variegated colours and perfect shape – rounded at the base and pointed at the top: this shape that has come to mean so much. I read the curling label:

> Guillemots and Razorbill only lay one egg at a time (except for the Black Guillemot that lays 1-2). None of the Guillemots build nests but lay the eggs on the bare rock and don’t try to hide their eggs. The Common and the Brunnich’s Guillemot lay their eggs on defined ledges or recesses, but the Razorbill prefers cracks or other more sheltered places.

The last time I saw Luca we were both helping to return a replica nineteenth-century wooden fishing boat to its winter storage. Was it last summer, or the one before? I forget: the summers and the winters look mostly the same in my memories. Differences between years are marked by major events that have some impact on the rhythm; or a trip abroad. In the summer this boat is housed just up the road from here at Ósvör, a collection of replica stone fishermen’s huts built as a museum.

The boat is part of the display at Ósvör, and I cannot count the number of times I have stood beside it with one of the bearded museum staff dressed in lambskin trousers, smock and sou’wester, amusing tourists with his rope ‘G-string’: the pre-modern era safety equipment for a man overboard. I would tell them how the boat was used to catch Greenlandic shark, which was in demand for its liver oil – shipped to Europe by the barrel load for street lighting. I would tell them that a crew of six men with a captain, rowed and sailed for three days into Greenlandic waters to find these sharks. I would tell them that a woman stayed at the hut

preparing food, fixing clothes and lines, and darning the men's woollen socks and their two-thumbed mittens: a vernacular bit of kit designed to be turned around as a hole wore in one joint, so the wearer could continue rowing. A bit of kit made to continue even once damage was done.

One September evening on the pebble beach I had happened upon a team of men, which included Luca, the G-string man, and Bjarni's father's friend Arngeir, smoking his pipe as ever. They were sliding the boat onto a series of whale ribs, placing the rib released from the back to the front, and repeating, all the way to the water. This is how it was always done, they said. I took over with the rib shifting as they pushed, until the boat had made it into the sea. I accepted their invitation for a short trip across the bay, which consisted of one word: 'Coming?'

In three years I never made it to this museum, even out of curiosity for how notoriously tired the displays were: aesthetically powerful enough to be used as set for a scene in the film *Nói Albinói*. Thanks to Luca my first visit is turning out to be quite memorable. I think I'll stay here for a while.

I am still not clear of the responsibilities that Guðjón's Sheriff title implies. What I do know is that he has given me work, entrusting me with the translation of several tourist signboards without any initial evidence of my ability, and it has continued since I've moved away. He is always very happy with my translations. Once, he paid me double what I'd asked for because he was late paying. Perhaps he thinks I am a genius learning Icelandic so fast. What he doesn't know is that I have a nepotistic pact with Bjarni's uncle Salvar who pre-translates the passages for me in his charming and slightly too literal way. I then work them into more flowing English. Salvar also works for Guðjón designing the artwork for these signboards.

Earlier I passed a signboard that I'd translated for Guðjón a couple of years ago. It is a special one made of driftwood logs on a patch of grass down by the harbour. A brazier stands in front of it, and Salvar's design is a patchwork of parchment and runes. It commemorates Bolungarvík being the believed place of origin of the *Völuspá* – 'The Prophecy of the Seeress' – an historic Icelandic poem conjured by Bolungarvík's female settler and her son around 940 AD. Legend has it she was named *Þuriður Sundafyllir* – 'Þuriður the Channel Filler' because she used her magic powers to attract myriad fish to the region. The fishing village of Bolungarvík was born as a result. Once, stone fishermen's huts, like the one at Ósvör museum, lined the beach. Still now the trawlers disgorge millions of fish, and so many

families have someone at sea. To think that the actions of a sorceress more than one thousand years ago precipitated the end of my marriage.

What am I now; now that I am gladly not a fisherman's wife?

Recently, I completed a signboard translation for Jonas' most recent brainchild – a project to formalise hitchhiking as a mode of public transport in the region, by having signposted pick-up spots including some guidelines for behaviour. Through this, I learned the beautiful Icelandic word-concoction for hitchhiker, which I could easily deduce by knowing the parts. *Putta-ferða-maður*: 'thumb-journey-man'. I enjoy still being asked to do this work. It feels like a part of me still lives here, and if I wish to I can visit my words dotted around the landscape whenever I return. Perhaps this is what I am now: a thumb-journey-man.

Luca returns with coffee and chocolate-coated raisins – '*nammi*' – the word for any sweet treats.

He leads me over to the whale jaw bone. It is at least three metres long.

'This is the one that used to be at Skrúður, remember?'

I remember it well. Skrúður is a miraculous botanical garden; an oasis in the rugged coastal terrain at Núpur, fifty kilometers from here, created by one Reverend Sigtryggur Guðlaugsson in 1909. It was one of the stops on my guiding trips. The Reverend had been headmaster of the neighbouring school, which these days is a hotel. With the garden, he wished to show his pupils that hard work and the right materials could make an Eden out of any corner of this earth. The long white reaches of this jaw bone used to touch at their high tips to form an archway into the garden. I must have taken more than a thousand cruise ship passengers under it in the three summers I worked as a guide.

'It got in a bad condition, so we had to take it down. It doesn't look so beautiful like this but what can we do?'

After coffee and chat he leaves me to browse 'the collection'. Ironically much of it you can see alive and well on the cliffs not far from here. I'm not sure why tourists would bother to come to this museum, but their expensive trips don't allow the luxury of time. Perhaps they'd rather see them dead than not at all. The effort made here is charming if you have no

expectations of European museum standards, but it is clearly an effort made at least thirty years ago.

Am I a tourist now? No. I will never be. Not here. I have gathered too much that is now a part of me. And I have left too much of me around this place. But what am I now, to this place and these people, to Bjarni's family? And what are they to me? What can I build with this experience, on home terrain?

A cluster of sticks in a cubic glass case catches my eye. It is both chaotic and coherent. I stroll over and look at it from above – a circular nest perhaps a metre in diameter. The perimeter, which makes up most of it, is a rough entanglement of twigs, driftwood, mussel shells, a strip of yellowing plastic container, a sheep's shoulder blade, a wooden knife handle, a TV aerial, and the rusted head of a rake with four missing tines. It is perfect for purpose – a hotchpotch of plant, human-made and animal detritus holding it together, weighing it down against the high winds. There are no trees here for a large bird to nest in: the nest must be resilient alone on a cliff. Its centre is a small, intimate hemisphere – less than a third of the whole: a bed of intricately woven fine grasses and frayed blue plastic rope threads, lined with down. Inside this centre lie four small eggs, almost lost in the flotsam. The label reads: *Raven's Nest*. The nest is safe now, sealed in this moment against the high winds. It is safe, but the eggs will never hatch.

Í burtu – In the distance

I am going back to England, unable to get divorced because of a telephone and internet drop-out. I am going back to England in the midst of a tremour swarm.

In Reykjavík with an afternoon to spare before my flight, I decide to check out some of my old haunts. After a bowl of *momos* at a new Tibetan café on the harbour front, I walk across to the Museum of Photography. It is housed on the top floor of the Municipal Library, which is five floors of cool. Rows of books, magazines, DVDs and music are shelved amongst clusters of white designer bucket chairs, which sit in the middle of bright rooms encircled by windows, allowing you always to get a glimpse of the mountains and the sea; to constantly remind you as you delve into the rest of the world, that we are Here on this rock.

I am happy to find there is a retrospective exhibition of an Icelandic press photographer, Ragnar Axelsson, whose work has captured my attention since early on in my relationship with Iceland. For the past thirty years he has documented the disappearing ways of life in the Arctic with complete devotion. His extensive journeying around Iceland, Greenland and the Faroes has yielded an unparalleled body of work featuring humans and animals and their ongoing conversations with their changing landscapes. Through his eyes, and with his instinct, his index finger on the shutter release is as a stethoscope to a pulse. He catches those intimate and fleeting moments in black and white that distil many lives lived across many decades, shown through one person, one horse, or one mountain. The viewer participates as much as he does in those moments – to hear and smell the scenes he portrays.

There are perhaps fifteen darkroom-printed images in this show, all at least a metre and a half wide and a metre tall, mounted spaciously on white walls. They are large enough that you can get inside of them. The labels are brief: there is nothing to say. The images say it all and you are silenced by it. My eyes scan the whisking textures of a horse's mane; the tension of the rope reins on a dog sled; the tones from the darkest black of an Innuit hunter's pupil to the burning white of an ice field, through flecks of grey clustering like midge swarms in summer.

One image roots my feet to the ground and makes my stomach thud. My focus zooms out and I see it as a whole. It is a grey sea at a tilt. In the foreground, a small white wooden boat captained by a solitary old man ploughs towards some near-distant dark mountains, its frothy

wake spilling off the margins. I *know* those mountains. I know their profile like I know Bjarni's neck. That is *my* valley; *my* village. I check the label to make sure. *Fisherman Guðmundur Eyjólfur, in Ísafjarðardjúp, the West Fjords*.

I am right. It *is* my valley and my village, seen from the sea, from the northwest; from an angle I have never seen it until now, but from which Bjarni saw it many times: every time he left me and every time he returned. From here, if he had a telescope, he would have seen me filming one of the saddest video clips I have ever seen, and I am its maker. He would have seen me standing at our living room window watching as his bright orange trawler slowly sailed across the fjord from the right of the frame to the left, moving imperceptibly slowly in the vastness of the darkening blue evening. I had tried to call him. The phone rang and rang but was never answered. He was probably doing something important with the nets. I did not know when I would next get to speak to him, or when he would be back. Nor did he. It was not the first time that had happened, not at all. But that time I had nearly reached my limit, and the only thing I could think of doing to cope was to video that moment; to attempt to make it abstract; to turn it into 'material'.

The photograph in front of me is both sad and uplifting because of what it portrays: a lone ageing fisherman, buffered from the coming weather by his woollen jumper and rubber dungarees. The small boat means he is a day-fisherman, who comes home each evening. He is nearly home now. There is a bucketful of fish, caught by his single line. His wife will be happy with the catch, and their house will be immaculate when he returns, as it was when he left that morning. He will scale and gut the fish, then have a shower. She will boil one fish and some potatoes for their dinner and put the rest in the freezer for later. Then they will watch the news to see what is happening in the rest of the world.

Few people fish like this now. The quota that was once allocated to all fishermen has mostly been bought up by huge fishing companies. That was the problem: the quota's saleability. For many small-scale fishermen, the temptation to have a lot of money up front rather than toiling in cruel weathers long term, was too great. They did not realise that in just twenty years, selling off their quota would kill a way of life that had been part of the Icelandic identity for centuries; that it would cause whole villages to have no reason to exist. They did not realise that it would cause such a massive depopulation of rural Iceland that a politician once claimed the state coffers would be better off if they put the whole population of the Westfjords – about three thousand people – in an apartment block in the capital and let the Westfjords return to wilderness. But this man is a stoic Westfjordian, still out on the sea, not

prepared to bemoan his loss in an old people's home in Reykjavík.

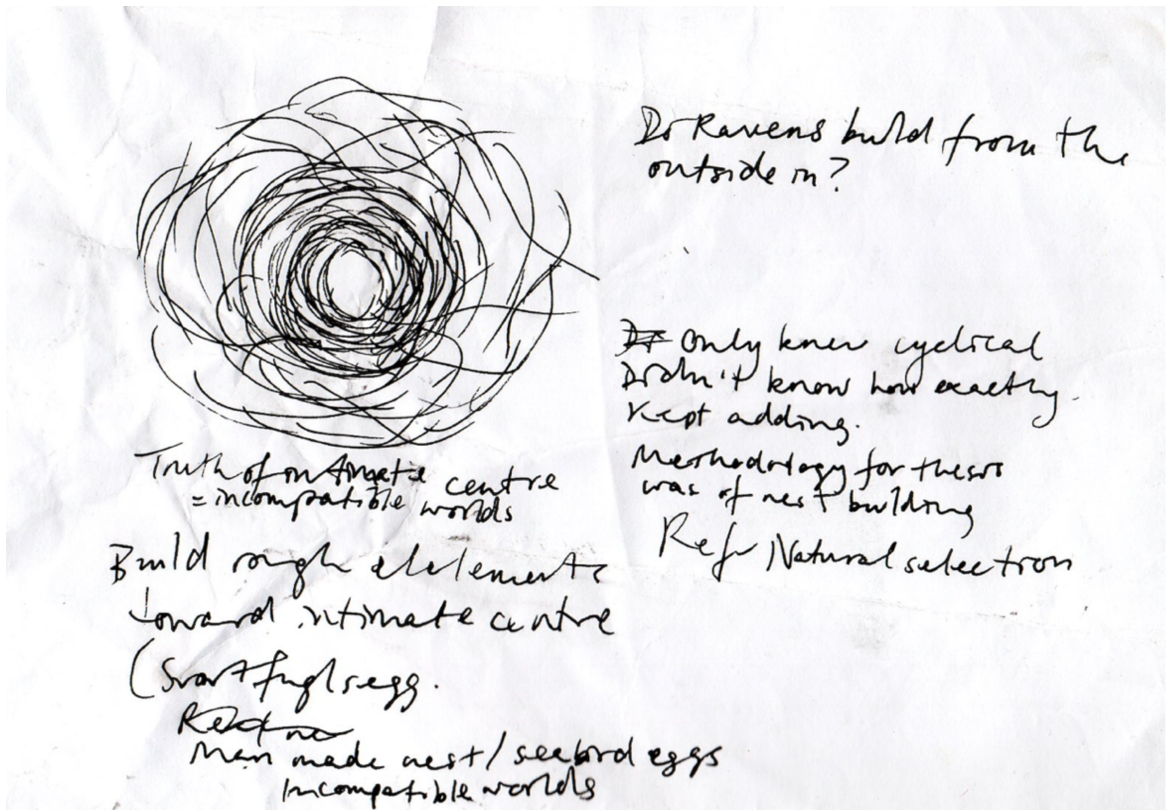
For me this image is so much more. If that is my village that must be my *house.* Here, on a sheet of photographic paper at the top of a tower block, I am looking at the corrugated iron-clad house in which all of this life of mine happened in sharp focus and full colour – this joy, this loneliness, this love, this creation, this attempting to belong – reduced to an indistinct white rectangle nestled amongst leaden grey buttresses of basalt. It is a speck of background to another story that is different to my own yet so much the same: the end of one way of life and the beginning of another.

Weaving Worlds with Raven

<u>The Raven's Nest</u>

A cluster of sticks in a cubic glass case catches my eye. It is both chaotic and coherent. I stroll over and look at it from above – a circular nest perhaps a metre in diameter. The perimeter, which makes up most of it, is a rough entanglement of twigs, driftwood, mussel shells, a strip of yellowing plastic container, a sheep's shoulder blade, a wooden knife handle, a TV aerial, and the rusted head of a rake with four missing tines. It is perfect for purpose – a hotchpotch of plant, human-made and animal detritus holding it together, weighing it down against the high winds. There are no trees here for a large bird to nest in: the nest must be resilient alone on a cliff. Its centre is a small, intimate hemisphere – less than a third of the whole: a bed of intricately woven fine grasses and frayed blue plastic rope threads, lined with down. Inside this centre lie four small eggs, almost lost in the flotsam. The label reads: *Raven's Nest*. The nest is safe now, sealed in this moment against the weathers of life. It is safe, but the eggs will never hatch.

Fragment 1. Raven's Nest, Natural History Museum, Bolungarvík, Westfjords, Iceland



Fragment 2: Early design sketch. NB the note 'Natural Selection' featured here is the name of the Artangel exhibition I attended which celebrated birds as artists. See www.artangel.org.uk/project/natural-selection [Accessed 3 March 2019]

1. Nest site *The Anthropocene*

Fragment 3: Nest site of a Common Raven. 'Raven's nest in a lava fissure'.

In 2019, we find ourselves in the midst of unprecedented anthropogenic climate change and environmental collapse, living through an epoch now commonly referred to as the *Anthropocene*.[1] While the precise beginning of the Anthropocene is cause for some debate, it is generally understood to coincide with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in Europe in the early 19th century. This launched a period of exponential economic and population growth driven by a drastic increase in the burning of fossil fuels, thereby accelerating climate change. The term, first coined in the 1960s, is a compound of *Anthropos*

[1] There is a scientific consensus from multiple international bodies on this state of affairs. See for example: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2014) *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability* http://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/wg2/ [accessed 3 May 2018] (the 5th report of updated reports published every four years); The Royal Society (2014) *Climate Change Evidence & Causes: An overview from the Royal Society and the US National Academy of Sciences* https://royalsociety.org/~/media/Royal_Society_Content/policy/projects/climate-evidence-causes/climate-change-evidence-causes.pdf [accessed 3 May 2018] and European Commission *Causes of Climate Change* https://ec.europa.eu/clima/change/causes_en [accessed 3 May 2018]

– humankind; and *cene* – recent.[2] It was popularized in 2000 by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer 'to designate the period of Earth's history during which humans have a decisive influence on the state, dynamics and future of the Earth system', a key feature being an irreversible imprint on the geological record.[3] Though it is not yet ratified by international stratigraphical authorities, it is a term now used ubiquitously across disciplines and has more recently become media vernacular.[4] The impoverishing effects of this epoch are multi-faceted and widespread, extending to all living things – those present and those to come.

Though the scientific community and mainstream media continue to provide us with facts and figures to illustrate climate change and its devastating effects, it remains a lowly concern for many people, despite its urgency. The human brain is wired for narrative, not for 'facts'; all the more so when the facts of this crisis are too big to fathom.[5] The stories we have been living by – of progress, of human centrality, of our separation from nature – clearly are not working. In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and The Unthinkable* (2016), author Amitav Gosh ponders why the very thing we all share, the fact of being subject to the enormity and urgency of the impact of climate change, is conspicuously absent from literature and, in fact, most culture. He believes this absence 'is an aspect of the broader imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis'.[6] The Anthropocene, then, calls for different stories than those we have relied upon in order to restore some integrity with the world we inhabit.

Not only are the stories themselves important but the positionalities from which they are told. As multispecies theorist Donna Haraway urges, 'It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories.'[7] In response to the environmental crisis we are facing, I join the throngs across disciplines who are calling for a revision of humankind's relationship with the Other, especially the other-than-human. I believe this is my responsibility as a writer.

---

[2] 'Anthropocene, n. and adj.' *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/398463 [accessed 1 April 2019]
[3] Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy, *Working Group on the 'Anthropocene'* (2018) http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/workinggroups/anthropocene/ [accessed 9 April 2018]
[4] See for example Damian Carrington, 'The Anthropocene epoch: Scientists declare dawn of human-influenced age', *Guardian* online, 29 August 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/aug/29/declare-anthropocene-epoch-experts-urge-geological-congress-human-impact-earth [accessed 10 April 2018]
[5] See 4.1 'Telling Tales: The Compelling Power of Narratives' in *Time for Change? Climate Science Reconsidered, Report of the UCL Policy Commission on Communicating Climate Science*, ed. by Chris Rapley and others (London: UCL, 2014), pp. 96 - 99.
[6] Amitav Gosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and The Unthinkable* (Chigago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 8.
[7] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 35.

My own sense of such relationships was dramatically revised through my experience of living in a remote corner of Iceland with and among ever-changing light, weather, mountains, rock, snow, ravens, seals, ghosts, farmers and fishermen, in a house whose history I knew, and eating food I had helped gather and butcher or that my husband had fished – a revision that is happening to the narrator over the course of the memoir presented here. This revision is reflected in its language, structure and content, and in the fact that this story takes the form of a memoir at all, rather than a documentary film, which was the narrator's original intent. The narrator is an ethnographic documentary-maker, who, over the course of the narrative, fails to make a film. The memoir repurposes her unused rushes (the raw footage) as memories, into a form possessing more integrity with the person she becomes and the world she inhabits.

Describing the construction of this memoir as a nest, through its weaving method, shape and building materials, I suggest that this kind of narrative and approach to storytelling and world-making might be one such different story for the Anthropocene: one in which the human narrator is de-centred; the narrative is non-linear; and in which nothing is overcome.

Björn Arnórsson.

SPÖRVAÆTTBÁLKURINN

(Passeriformes)

HRAFNINN

(Corvus corax, L.).[1])

Fyrst skal frægan telja. Krumma gamla þekkja flestir og ekki allir að góðu. Því fer fjarri, að hann sé „ljótr og svartr". Hann er fallega gljáandi svartur, en stálblá og fjólulituð slikja er aftan á höfðinu, á hálsinum og niður á herðar. Hann er staðfugl og fellur því oft í harðindum. Hann kann þó fugla bezt að bjarga sér, því að hann er alæta. Eru lifnaðarhættir hans í því efni alkunnir.

Fragment 4: RAVEN (Corvus Corax). 'First what is well-known: Most people know 'old Krummi' but not everyone for good reasons. It's not at all the case that he is 'ugly and black.' He is a beautiful shiny black, but there's a steel blue and violet-coloured lustre at the back of his head, on his neck and below on his shoulders. He dwells year-round in the same place and thus often faces hardships. He knows best of all birds how to look after himself, however, because he eats everything. His survival skills in this respect are renowned.'[8]

[8] *Ferðafélag Íslands Árbók 1939* (Reykjavík: Ísafoldarprentsmiðja, 1939), p. 17. Translation: Emily Lethbridge.

2. Nest Construction

Fragment 5: A model for a memoir - deconstructed. Rough twiggy outer structure/ fine intricate centre/ experiments with materials, bindings and entanglements.

In thinking through the words with which to world the memoir, I have found particular resonance in the theoretical work of two thinkers. The first is Donna Haraway, in particular her collection of essays relating to 'entanglements' in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016). The second is writer Ursula K. Le Guin, in particular her essay 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' (1986).[9] Haraway and Le Guin echo one another in their thinking on Anthropocenic living and being and Haraway acknowledges Le Guin's significant influence on her work, particularly in 'Sowing Worlds: A Seed Bag for Terraforming with Earth Others' (2016, p. 5, p. 118). Together their ideas make visible a theoretical architecture for my project of 'nest-building'. Haraway's concept of 'entanglements' is a weaving device, and Le Guin's 'Carrier Bag Theory' provides a shape, with which to imagine the making of the memoir-nest. Such capacious entanglements describe not only the stories the memoir holds but also the positionality of the narrator (Haraway 2016, p. 35).

[9] Ursula K. Le Guin, 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction', in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women Places,* ed. by Ursula K. Le Guin (New York: Grove Press, 1989), pp. 165-170.

2.1 *Entanglements*

Fragment 6: 'Good strong binding': man-made and organic materials interwoven with English and Icelandic words.

As a theorist, Haraway is committed to rupturing the 'deadly habits' of Euro-American thinking.[10] One such habit she wills us to imagine beyond is 'the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves.'[11] For Haraway, worlds hang together in ways more complex than the blind dichotomies of nature/culture, animal/human, organic/ artificial (Kenney 2017, p.73).

In *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016) Haraway is critical of the dualistic thinking that generates two primary human stances on living in a wounded, poisoned Anthropocene: agency and apathy. Within these stances she describes several dominant attitudes: optimism born of a naïve belief in 'technofixes' to solve the environmental crisis; increased awareness of the urgency of our situation but without any signs of behavioural change; and wholesale denial in the face of unprecedented climate change and species loss. Countered with this is another: a fatalistic attitude that it's too late

[10] Martha Kenney, 'Donna Haraway (2016) Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene', *Science & Technology Studies*, 30, 2 (2017), 73 -76 (p. 73).
[11] Donna Haraway, *Simians Cyborgs and Women: The Re-Invention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 181.

anyway *(SWT,* p.3-4). Wearing these gloves of agency and apathy, both hands refrain from meaningful action.

To this 'Great Dithering' (*SWT*, p.144), Haraway proposes getting our hands dirty – because nothing is clean anymore anyway – and 'staying with the trouble' (*SWT*, p. 1). This, she recommends,

> […] requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings (*SWT,* p.1).

CITYNEWS

OSLO

Hielo de lujo

_ *Luxury ice*

Svaice es una *start-up* noruega que ha empezado a extraer hielo del glaciar Svartisen para venderlo a restaurantes de lujo. Su cliente principal por el momento es Dubai y las autoridades regionales de Noruega ven tan claro que el negocio traerá empleo y beneficios a la zona que les han dado una subvención para las tareas de extracción. Svaice sabe que su producto es limitado y se acabará pronto, por eso definen sus cubitos de hielo como un artículo de lujo, 100% natural y con más de mil años de historia, capaces de hacer vivir una experiencia a quien los ponga en su copa.

Svaice is a Norwegian start-up that is extracting ice from the Svartisen glacier in order to sell it at luxury restaurants. Its main buyers at present are located in Dubai. The local authority in Norway expects the company's activities to bring employment and benefits to the area, and so it is supporting extraction activities with a grant. Svaice knows that its product is limited and will soon run out, and for this reason it is offering its ice cubes as luxury articles. Cubes are 100% natural and the ice is over a thousand years old, so they claim that using their ice cubes in drinks offers a unique experience.

Fragment 7: A manifestation of Anthropocenic denial? Agency? Apathy?

In common, Haraway and Le Guin resist the idea that technology is the apex of human endeavour. In conversation with Jonathan White, Le Guin asserts that her resistance is to a 'growth technology' such as has followed the Industrial Revolution through to present, rather than the 'refined technology' possessed by humans for millennia (Le Guin in White 2016, p.118). She states, 'We're convinced that our exploitative, fast-growing technology is the only possible reality' (2016, p.119). Le Guin uses her novels to explore alternatives. For example, in *Always Coming Home* (1985), she conjures a post-apocalyptic people – the Kesh – who, reconnected with ritual and seasonal cycles, view believers of such exploitative

ideologies as 'weird aberrations' who lived, as they put it, 'outside the world' (2016, p.119).[12] While Haraway embraces helpfully applied technology, she dismisses a 'comic faith in technofixes' as a solution to climate change; that 'technology will somehow come to the rescue of its naughty but very clever children' (*SWT*, p3.).

One such technofix is geoengineering. Though proposed geoengineering solutions – whether to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere or to adjust the atmosphere's reflectivity – are not as yet in use, dependence on such technological interventions for our ecological crisis is problematic for several reasons.[13] They are far from being environmentally harmless in themselves: their manufacture can require the mining of heavy metals, and energy-intensive production from energy sources that are often not carbon neutral. And such technologies are inevitably linked to the global web of energy consumptive devices and networks: an ever-increasing source of pollution. The world's data centres in 2015 alone consumed about 3 per cent of the world's electricity and accounted for 2 percent of total global emissions: approximately equal to the aviation industry.[14]

To believe in geoengineering as the future 'solution' for climate change simply defers meaningful action to some unnamed future point, once the requisite technologies for climate intervention will have presumably materialized. This attitude excuses society's current rates of consumption and allows it to continue unabated. It is, in effect, apathy merely masquerading as agency. The folly in such thinking is that it demands for humans to continue on a trajectory of domination over the earth's ecosystems – the trajectory which gave rise to the ecological crisis – so as to overcome its consequences.

The perceived neutrality of machines allows such belief in the power of technology to penetrate and alter the worlds available to think with. This can occur beyond the awareness of the thinker:

> As science becomes increasingly technologized, so does every domain of human thought and action, gradually revealing the extent of our unknowing even as it reveals new possibilities (Bridle 2018, p.102).

[12] Ursula K. Le Guin, *Always Coming Home* (London: Orion, 2016) originally published 1985 and Ursula K. Le Guin 'Crossing Back from the Silence' in *Talking on the Water: Conversations about Nature and Creativity,* ed. by Jonathan White (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2016), pp. 99-120 (p.119).
[13] Mike Hulme, *Weathered: Cultures of Climate* (London: Sage, 2017), p. 120.
[14] James Bridle, *A New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (London: Verso, 2018), p. 63.

Technological approaches, therefore, reinforce the distancing, hierarchy and disconnected language that has largely contributed to such ecological destruction to start with.

In place of such anthropocentric and undemocratic endeavours, Le Guin and Haraway propose more convivial and truly democratic ways of living, dying and 'becoming-with' in revised arrangements of relationships between humans and other-than-humans *(SWT,* p.40). For '[s]uch living and dying have the best chance of cultivating conditions for ongoingness' (*SWT,* p.38). Haraway draws frequently upon Le Guin's work in *Staying with the Trouble*, and their ideas have a coherence when studied together which resonates with my position as a storyteller (world-maker) and a narrator in several key ways.

Their theories and their writing subvert dominant narratives and resist human centrality. When talking about 'humans', both are careful to differentiate between those who have power and tend to speak, and those whose voices are suppressed. This concern is articulated in Haraway's objection to the term Anthropocene. While sympathetic to the scale of change it captures, she counters, 'Surely such a transformative time on earth must not be named the Anthropocene!' (*SWT,* p.31). For Haraway, the *Anthropos* in Anthropocene is 'Tool, weapon, word: that is the word made flesh in the image of the sky-god' tied up with a masculinist narrative of domination (p.39). *Anthropos* also makes for a one-dimensional representation of humans-in-general which avoids the politics of oppression of marginalised peoples, who stand to suffer the most from the environmental degradation resulting from global corporate capitalism. In riposte she offers the 'Capitalocene' (*SWT*, p.47).

For Le Guin, de-centring within the human sphere takes place when alternatives to a Eurocentric historical civilised narrative can come to the fore. She writes, 'With the help of anthropologists, and now historians, we are finding that there is no centre, or that there are many centres.'[15] But still such de-centring does not encompass the myriad networks of other-than-humans they seek to honour: the 'tentacular' ones – be they 'squid, jellyfish, neural extravaganzas…fungal tangles…swelling roots' or 'nets and networks, IT critters, and out of clouds' - and the way in which we make worlds *together*, in 'sympoiesis' (*SWT,* pp.32-33). Le Guin and Haraway also advocate a de-centring *of* 'the human' to see it as part of an intricate web of other non-human actors, a state Haraway calls 'entanglement' (*SWT*, p.4).

[15] Ursula K. Le Guin 'Crossing Back from the Silence' in *Talking on the Water: Conversations about Nature and Creativity,* ed. by Jonathan White (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2016), pp. 99-120 (p.106).

Haraway asks:

> How can we think in times of urgencies *without* the self-indulgent and self-fulfilling myths of apocalypse, when every fibre of our being is interlaced, even complicit, in the webs of processes that must somehow be engaged and repatterned? (*SWT,* p.35).

In her essay 'Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene' (2016) Haraway proposes yet another alternative term for our epoch – the Chthulucene – to acknowledge this interconnectedness, derived from the spider *Pimoa cthulhu.* This co-dweller in her home terrain in the redwoods of California gets its taxonomic name from the underworld: 'chthonic' (*SWT,* p.31). For Haraway, a tentacular 'critter' that connects the above *and* the below, travels elsewhere *and* has a place, and makes webs and knots and cuts and routes, is a fitting symbol for our epoch and the intimacy and collective thinking required to be generative within it. We, the world-makers and the storytellers, she argues, need to think of ourselves in a myriad of deep and complex 'entanglements' from which collaborations and phenomena as yet un-thought of could emerge (*SWT,* p.4).

Meanwhile, in her essay 'Women/Wilderness' (1989), Le Guin frames 'Civilised Man' as considering himself the master of the world and everything else as Other: 'I am that I am, and the rest is women and the wilderness, to be used as I see fit.'[16] But then she marks a shift:

> The wilderness is answering back. Those who were identified as having nothing to say…those who were identified with Nature, which listens, as against Man, who speaks – those people are speaking. They speak for themselves and for other people, animals, trees, rivers, rocks. And what they say is: We are sacred…they do not say Nature is sacred. Because they distrust that word, Nature. Nature as not including humanity, Nature as what is not human (1989, p.162).

This example demonstrates a trope that pervades Le Guin's work: a call upon the reader's moral responsibility to listen and hear themselves as part of nature; to understand that when humans harm nature, they are harming themselves. As Le Guin scholar Lilian Heldreth notes, this individual responsibility is the basis for a kind of community that may take steps away from the materialism and technology threatening humanity's future.[17]

---

[16] Ursula K. Le Guin, 'Woman/ Wilderness' in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*, ed. by Ursula K. Le Guin (New York: Grove Press, 1989) pp. 161-164 (p.161).
[17] Lilian M. Heldreth, 'To Defend or to Correct: Patterns of Culture in *Always Coming Home*', *Mythlore*, 59 (1989), 58-62 (p. 58).

Haraway similarly emphasises such responsibility in community. She believes it is 'precarity – failure of the lying promises of Modern Progress [that] characterizes the lives and deaths of all terran critters in these times' (*SWT*, p.37) and 'we are at stake in each other's company' (*SWT*, p. 39).

Fragment 8: My raven neighbours

Haraway recommends, then, as a means through our Anthropocenic predicament, to embrace the community of human Others and other-than-humans. She is as clear now as John Muir was more than a century ago, that 'the individual' is in fact 'hitched to everything else'.[18] That is to say that the scientific evidence for the interconnectedness of life in the biosphere is now so overwhelming that 'human exceptionalism and bounded individualism [are now] unthinkable in the best sciences, whether natural or social' (*SWT,* p.30). These, she believes, are two myths which have been fundamental to the unconstrained march of human 'progress', and to the stories we make about ourselves (*SWT,* p.39).

[18] John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), p.110. Originally published 1911.

Le Guin suggests that the writer or artist, as world-maker, is well-disposed to inspire such conviviality owing to their ability to synthesise apparently disparate realities, and to experiment:

> […] what artists do is make a particularly skilful selection of fragments of cosmos, unusually useful and entertaining bits chosen and arranged to give an illusion of coherence and duration amidst the uncontrollable streaming of events.[19]

In the midst of chaos and wounding, the narratives and images created by skilfully weaving such messy threads can, in turn, allow people to identify with their part in the world, and realising themselves as in community with humans and Others, to care for it. My memoir intends to do such work.

Haraway reminds us that 'tentacle' comes from the Latin *tentare,* which means 'to feel' and 'to try' (*SWT,* p.31). She recommends we show up and entwine with the writhing chaos of our wounded world – 'staying with the trouble'. Such a tentacular approach does not deny the grief of our predicament. Rather, it views grief as a route to empathy: 'Grief is a path to understanding entangled shared living and dying; human beings must grieve *with,* because we are in and of this fabric of undoing' (*SWT* p.39). There is a compelling joy and willingness to Haraway's approach, which avoids turning towards the hubris of isolated despair (*SWT,* p 4). I am reminded of the first Icelandic phrase I learned; a catch-all in a world of limited resources at the edge of civilisation: *bara profa* – 'just try.'

[19] Ursula K. Le Guin, 'World Making', in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*, ed. by Ursula K. Le Guin (New York: Grove Press, 1989), pp. 46-48 (pp. 46-47).

Fragment 9: Raven feather

Haraway's 'entanglements' and her tentacular approach are not only concepts. They are the way in which she inhabits her world, her work and her words. In *Staying with the Trouble,* the mythic is put to work with Anthropocenic scholarship from a multiplicity of disciplines and locales. Those who may normally be marginalised are brought into the throng – her mode of citation acknowledging all of her influences from Masters students to jellyfish – and her thinking is thus presented as inherently collaborative.

The integrity of her thinking also pervades her prose: she invents new language for these new ways of being, and form mirrors content. The text is an experiment in tentacular mode. Like her spider, she spins prose that is recursive and looping, gathering around central motifs then spinning off along a variety of co-existing storylines: making space for the more-than-one story. From her chapter 'Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene; Cthulucene':

> The Chthulucene does not close in on itself; it does not round off; its contact zones are ubiquitous and continuously spin out loopy tendrils. Spider is a much better figure for sympoiesis than any inadequately leggy vertebrate of whatever pantheon. Tentacularity is symchthonic, wound with abyssal and dreadful graspings, frayings and weavings, passing relays again and again, in the generative recursions that make up living and dying. (p.33).

The prose in *The Raven's Nest* also embodies the shape of the entanglements between the narrator and her world. It is recursive, cyclical, many-threaded; containing ruptures and breakages then weaving them back in. This shall be discussed in more detail in the following chapter *Writing the Nature of North.*

2.2 *Shape*

Fragment 10: A model for a memoir – a nest of words and worlds.

In *Woman's Creation: Sexual Evolution and the Shaping of Society* (1979), feminist anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher challenges the received assumption that tools, such as arrows and hand axes, were the earliest and most influential cultural devices.[20] In her essay 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Evolution' she proposes instead 'the carrier bag as the take-off point for the quantum advance which created the multiplier effect that led to humanity' (1979, p.56). What is the point in hunting or gathering a load of food, she argues, if you have nothing to put it in?

Ursula Le Guin revises Fisher's work for the writer, in her essay 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' (1989). In it, she calls for a narrative shape which pertains to life, to resist the

[20] Elizabeth Fisher, *Woman's Creation: Sexual Evolution and the Shaping of Society* (London: Wildwood House, 1979)

ubiquity of the conventional ‘arc’ which, she argues, pertains to death. Transposing Fisher’s container idea onto narrative, Le Guin speculates on the origins of the dominant conflict narrative, suggesting that it was challenging to tell a gripping tale about gathering nuts and berries, or sitting around making things and enjoying each other’s company in the abundant leisure time that the hunter-gatherer lifestyle afforded. It was the male activity of hunting that yielded the most engaging stories:

> It wasn’t the meat that made the difference, it was the story...That story not only has Action, it has a Hero. Heros are powerful. Before you know it, the men and women in the wild-oat patch and their kids and the skills of the makers and the thoughts of the thoughtful and the songs of the singers are all part of it, have all been pressed into service in the tale of the Hero. But it isn’t their story. It’s his (Le Guin 1989, p. 166).

Le Guin proposes that there has been a resultant bias in storytelling of all kinds, towards the use of phallic devices and linear Hero narratives which have a beginning, a middle and an end, in which there is inevitable conflict and in which something is overcome: in short, male ‘death’ stories (1989, p.169). She argues that this is part of the reason we find ourselves in such a compound social, environmental, economic crisis (arguably much worse now than at the time her essay was written).

In *If Women Rose Rooted: The Journey to Authenticity and Belonging* (2016) Sharon Blackie has warned us more recently that, ‘If you see life as linear, so that progress and growth are what give it meaning, then it is hard to endure impermanence of any kind.’[21] Le Guin urges for an alternative feminine tradition to develop – a ‘life’ story:

> We’ve heard it, we’ve all heard about all the sticks and spears and swords, the things to bash and hit and poke with, the long, hard things, but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained. That is a new story. That is news.
>
> And yet old (Le Guin, p.167).

Indeed, it is old. Most indigenous cultures have a non-linear, most often cyclical, approach to time, for example. Blackie reminds those in Britain that ‘It is also at the heart of our old native ways of knowing: the Celts viewed time, and so life, as cyclical rather than linear’ (Blackie 2016, p. 339). The ‘life’ story has manifested in oral traditions for millennia (Le

---

[21] Sharon Blackie, *If Women Rose Rooted: A Journey to Authenticity and Belonging* (Tewkesbury: September Publishing, 2016), p. 339.

Guin, 1989 p. 168). It is not a case of cultural appropriation to find ways of telling stories that do not follow the structures and tropes of the Hero narratives: it is a case of remembering old stories and finding new languages for them, fast.

> The trouble is, we've all let ourselves become part of the killer story, and so we may get finished along with it. Hence it is with a certain feeling of urgency that I seek the nature, subject, words of the other story, the untold one, the life story (Le Guin 1989, p. 168).

What might be the nature of this other story? And with which materials might it be made?

3. Building Materials

Fragment 11: Raven's nest detail, Natural History Museum, Bolungarvík, Westfjords, Iceland. Knife handle, drift wood, baler twine, bone, feather, grass, fleece, plastic, twigs, rushes.

3.1 *(Reborne) Metaphors*

Fragment 12: Building materials for model nest (fleece, root, ceramic)

For Le Guin, much of the human de-centring and new ways of being in the world she proposes must take place through the language we use. In conversation with Jonathan White, Le Guin demands a linguistic paradigm shift to address the troubled human relationship to nature:

> We can't restructure our society without restructuring the English language. One reflects the other. A lot of people are getting tired of the huge pool of metaphors that have to do with war and conflict. The "war against drugs" is an obvious example of this. …[O]nce you become conscious of these battle metaphors, you can start "fighting" against them. …Another [option] is to realize that conflict is not the only human response to a situation and to begin to find other metaphors, such as resisting, outwitting, skipping, or subverting. This kind of consciousness can open the door to all sorts of new behaviour.
>
> I am struck by how much we talk about rebirthing but never about *rebearing.* …A door opens just by changing the name. We don't have to be reborn; we can *rebear*. This is part of the writer's job, either to rebear metaphors or refuse to use them (Le Guin in White 2016, p.107).

Metaphors organise the way we comprehend our experience and make meaning in our lives. In *Metaphors We Live By* (1980)*,* Lakoff and Johnson determine that 'one kind of thing' is understood 'in terms of another'.[22] A 'war against' something suggests that it can be won,

[22] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1980), p.5.

and that when it is won it is over: it is framed as a linear and dualistic action, rather than a complex process with many agents and no end. To illustrate Le Guin's point, before its implications have fully settled, I might refer to her proposal as a 'call to arms' for writers. I might then realise how entrenched is the language of conflict to which she refers that I have just replicated it, no matter how non-violent I imagine my values to be.

Mobilising her call, and re-constellating my metaphors, I might consider instead a 'call to alms'. Rather than a call for writers to engage in, for example, 'the *battle against* climate change' it is a call to acknowledge the writer's role in shifting the way we perceive, live and die in societies under strain on a damaged planet. By offering a temporary, adaptable but robust kind of 'home' or shelter through their choice and arrangement of words, writers might provide nourishment, sustenance and collaborative empowerment to an impoverished world. The energy behind the action feels completely different with the change of only one letter. As Le Guin promises, a door opens, and the action promises to be ongoing and generative. Le Guin considers the work of an artist a 'sacred call' with 'a terrific sense of responsibility. We've got to do it right…Because that's the whole point: either it's right or it's all wrong' (Le Guin in White 2016, p. 104). In the Anthropocene, this sense of responsibility is heavier and more urgent, with a growing awareness of the diversity of those to whom we are responsible.

For me, telling this story 'right' involved an unpicking of identities in several registers – professional, personal, ontological – which have much to do with the responsibilities of language-rebearing outlined by Le Guin. What we call things affects how we perceive and treat them. 'We use language as a device for distancing,' she says. Take the word 'ecosystem': Le Guin points out that, 'Somebody who is genuinely living in their ecosystem wouldn't have a word. They just call it the world' (Le Guin in White 2016, pp. 106-107). As 'the world' it is more likely to be perceived as home.

I was mindful that the way in which I told this story should not distance the reader. Though I am writing a memoir of the Anthropocene, I am not writing 'crisis' head on. I did not wish to set the reader in opposition to the world I create, rather to weave them into it. At no point do I refer to the narrator's context as 'the environment' or 'nature' (it is her 'world' after all). And I intend to avoid the distancing language of polemic. Instead I arrange what might seem to be dramatic events into their rightful place in the everyday of the narrator's experience. My aim by doing this is not so much to motivate a *fight* for change as to show

how ‘*I’* was changed, and to bring the elements which changed me into the reader’s reality for the duration of the memoir, and hopefully beyond.

To give a couple of examples, the chapter ‘*Seljavallalaug* – ‘shieling-field-pool’’ addresses the geological time-scale changes in the landscape which occur in much shorter timescales in this Icelandic context. The narrator returns to a hot spring, four years after her first visit, only to find it is no longer in the same place because the valley has filled with volcanic ash following an eruption (p.178). The chapter ‘*Þakkið* (‘Roof’)’, meanwhile, alludes to polar melt through the increasing frequency of polar bears washing up on Iceland’s shores, one of them recent (p.127). At this time the roof on the narrator’s house is being replaced. Unseasonable snowfall means that the roofless house is snowed on and leaks. Thus the chapter meditates on what it is to have one’s home in jeopardy, for both humans and non-humans. Haraway’s sense of ‘grieving with’ is evoked in terms of the ever shrinking possibility to have a stable home on this earth.

3.2 *Language*

Fragment 13: Building materials for model nest (words, fastenings, connections)

Taking as the writer’s craft and responsibility to ‘rebear’ metaphors away from conflict and towards relationship, led to a realisation: just as I am an entangled human, my narrator must

also be an 'entangled' one, 'becoming-with' (Haraway 2016, p. 40). What would that look like?

Learning Icelandic while discovering my new world in Iceland, exposed me to the novel constellations of relationships offered up by Icelandic words. Many are compound words made of several others. Learning through immersion, I began to recognise parts of words coming up in a variety of contexts. And in Icelandic, no object, feeling or phenomena seemed to exist independently, but in (often quite poetic) 'entanglement' with its context. Learning the words' parts and their wholes, the relationship between them, and how they were used, changed how I thought about my world. Take, for example, the expression *Þetta kemur í ljós* ('That will come into the light'). This is used in contexts where in English one might say, 'Time will tell' rather than that something has 'come to light'. But I never understood it as describing a simple case of revelation. Light is a fundamental concern so far north. In Icelandic, the light seemed to be attributed agency to create or change a reality, rather than simply to reveal something predetermined.

How would one approach 're-structuring the English language' as Le Guin calls for the writer to do? In my case, it was learning this other language which allowed me to look at my own language, and the world, anew. Anglo Saxon and Skaldic (Viking) poets made use of 'kennings', a term which comes from the old Norse verb *að kenna*: to know, recognise, ken. These are compounds, most often based on metaphor, sometimes so obscure they become riddles. They consist of a 'base word' and a 'determinant'. For example, 'whale-house' is a kenning for the sea, with 'house' being the base word. Understanding this, it could be modified so that moon-house could be the sky and soup-house, a bowl.[23] In his essay 'N64 35.378, W16 44.691' Icelandic author Andri Snær Magnason ponders how writers might find a language to engage with the enormity of change and destruction in our current era. For him the era sees a glacier which his grandparents travelled across as one of many globally that are disappearing. He recalls the transition in language neccessitated by another abrupt change – the arrival of Christianity to Iceland:

> The old skaldic poets used a language and poetry that was saturated with Nordic mythology. To say 'sky' in a poem, you did not say sky you said 'the dwarf's helmet'. To say earth, you did not say earth, you said, 'bride of Odin'. When the poets became Christian they were confronted with a problem. How do you talk about the creator of heaven and earth when the language forces you to talk about God, the creator of the

[23] 'What are Kennings?' https://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/resources/mpvp/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/What-are-kennings.pdf [accessed 7 June 2018]

> dwarf's helmet and Odin's bride? It took decades to find new metaphors and a language with which they could speak about God without being drenched in the old metaphors. Imagining 500 million people affected, imagining the glaciers covering 500,000 square kilometres of land, I feel that these issues are so large that I don't really have a language to talk about them, and it seems that there are no maps to navigate properly into this future.[24]

In contrast, as a foreigner I have found the Icelandic language, and the process of learning it, a useful guide not so much to talk *about* these issues but to evoke them into a lived present on the page. Despite the arrival of Christianity on Iceland's shores more than a millennium ago, I found the language full of kennings still. Such words demonstrated a playful and poetic approach to an animate, dynamic and reciprocal world. Looking at a selection of quotidian words, with the structure and nature of kennings in mind, reveals how Icelandic took hold through repetition of certain component words (base words and determinants), and made new pathways in my imagination.

Looking at the following words from my film-making field together, demonstrates how a web of vocabulary can begin to form: *ljósmynd* (photograph – 'light image'); *hugmynd* (idea – 'mind image'); *kvikmynd* (film – 'moving/ quick image'); *myndband* (videotape – 'image band'); *myndavél* (camera – 'image machine'); *ljósrit* (photocopy – 'light writing'); *ljósbrot* (refraction – 'light breaking').

Other aspects of the language-in-place animated my world. My valley, *Hnífsdalur*, translates as 'Knife Valley' named after the sharp-edged arrete upon the mountain flanking its eastern side, over which the sun returns after the long winter. Understanding this affected how I percieved the light as being cut out of the sky as winter descended and made that mountain an active protagonist in the very real luminous concerns of my daily and yearly cycles. Topograhical landmarks also had names which related to their purpose or a history: *Hvalskurðurá* ('whale cutting river') marks the boundary of my ex-father-in law's land. It is a rapidly flowing stream at which whales used to be butchered so they could be cleaned. Learning this I learned also about the history of the place, his history, and his relationships with the other-than-human. Each place name was an entry point into a larger story.

Modern, technological words speak to something elemental and ancient: *rafmagn* (electricity) literally translates as 'amber power', relating to the Greeks' discovery of static

[24] Andri Snær Magnason, 'N64 35.378, W16 44.69', *Dark Mountain,* 14 (The Dark Mountain Project, 2018), pp. 29-38 (p. 38).

electricity by rubbing animal fur on amber. *Tölva* (computer) is a conflation of *tala* ('to count') and *völva*, a female oracle common in Norse mythology. Thus 'computer' translates as 'number oracle'. Meanwhile 'natural' words embed me in greater patterns of movement. The wildflower *Hrafnaklukkan* ('Raven's clock') led me to discover the plant's colloquial English name 'Cuckoo flower'. Both names relate to the time of year the flower blooms, when a notable bird recedes from human habitations (Icelandic) or arrives (English).

My world – including familiar objects – was revealed anew through these words, as a reciprocal world of many 'agents'. I consequently became fascinated by the etymology and potential arrangements of English words. Of course, the etymology of any language can give rise to new understandings. But the fact of being a language *learner,* breaking words down, taking apart my understanding of the world and putting it together in new ways, allowed me to restructure *my* English language to reflect this reciprocity. It allowed me something approaching a response to Le Guin's call. In the memoir I bring this process of language learning into the narrative through description, through internal and external dialogue, and through my chapter titles – with parts adding up to wholes and breaking apart again. Thus, a meta-narrative is evoked in which the narrator lays bare the means by which she comprehends her entanglement.

3.3 *Rushes – as thoughts – as memories*

Fragment 14: Oðin with his ravens Huginn ('Thought') and Muninn ('Memory'). He exchanged one eye for wisdom. Source: *Melsteðs Edda* https://handrit.is/en/manuscript/view/is/SAM-0066 [accessed 3 May 2019]

When I moved to Iceland, I was an ethnographic documentary film-maker. My arrival coincided with the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008 and, aside from making a life, I intended to make a film about resilience in rural areas. I believed that as I settled and integrated, I could get to know people who would become potential subjects; and learn Icelandic so I could understand what I was observing. And, being part of my Icelandic then-boyfriend's family, I believed it would be relatively straightforward to shoot some 'authentic' footage of Icelanders being 'resilient', however that manifested itself.

I was trained in ethnographic (observational) documentary. This practice involves spending time in the context one will make the film before starting to shoot, identifying inherent narratives playing out, rather than imposing a pre-existing, clearly defined concept. The film-maker usually works alone or with a sound-person recording synchronous sound. There is no narration, and the film-maker generally remains silent and attempts to remain 'invisible' behind the camera. Relating to such 'invisibility' Film and Digital Media scholar Won-Leep Moon concurs that:

> A reasonable degree of absence is enough. The boundary is vague, of course, but if it is unclear whether the subject is seriously controlled, it will also be unclear whether the film can be an observational documentary.[25]

What remains clear is that the film-maker does not converse, or to any great extent interact, with the 'subject' from behind the camera. Discussing the rules of observational documentary (referred to below as OBS) Moon raises 'borderline cases' whereby the film-maker (M) puts herself in front of the camera and is candid about her interactions with subjects. However, he states,

> The problem is the applicability of OBS to M. M's behavior is controlled by the maker, but the maker is herself. We may solve this dilemma, though, by 'dividing' M into the maker (creator of a world) MM and the subject (sufferer of the world) MS. That is, if her behavior is influenced more by MS than by MM, it meets OBS. In a simpler language, she has to be true to herself (2018, p. 54).

Such cases involve the acknowledgment of the film maker's presence through their position in front of the camera. This was not a position I wished to take in my film, and nor is it a position my narrator takes in the memoir. It was not intended to be *about* her, but about the world as seen through her eyes.

Despite the impossibility of 'absence', my perception was that observational documentary, with its agenda to 'show' reality 'as it is', had a certainty about it: having spent time in the context, the film-maker would have an overall idea of what they were going to shoot – what 'truth' they were telling – while the details would play out in the moment of shooting. Iceland, however, showed itself to be a context in which I could plan for nothing and rarely understood what was happening. As time went by, I knew less and less what was 'true': on many occasions, what seemed to be 'true', so did its opposite. A phenological example of this is that one winter's evening as the sun set, the snow on the ground seemed to emit light from within such that as the sky got darker, overall my environment felt brighter. A social example is that, before I was familiar with Icelandic social etiquette towards a person one does not know well, I might have thought my community uninterested in me – perhaps unfriendly. No questions were asked of me for months. I subsequently learned it is considered an intrusion on someone's privacy to ask questions. This was therefore a courteous gesture, which I could come to see as friendly. I was, necessarily, uncertain. I needed to ask questions with the camera itself – of myself and of the world I was discovering.

[25] Won-Leep Moon, 'Documentary and its realism', *Studies in Documentary Film,* 12, 1 (2018), 43-55 (p. 47).

Experimentation was required. I had no training in experimental video techniques and little idea of how to ask such questions with video. Or more precisely, I had some ideas, but I had not seen a precedent for the way in which I wished to explore my new world with my video camera: one in which the definition between ‘subject’ and ‘object’ was blurred, and which allowed for many (sometimes paradoxical) ‘truths’ to co-exist. Nevertheless, I continued to shoot footage of moments, events, phenomena, people and creatures that interested me, not knowing how I would weave them into a whole. This footage was invariably hand-held, moving as I moved, zooming in with my own curiosity, holding on moments of unfolding. It was also often shaky as I tried to keep steady in the cold, while breathing.

Bearing in mind Le Guin’s thoughts on the shape of narrative and the metaphors we use, it is notable that the language of film production (which digital video has to a great extent appropriated), demonstrates two characteristics to which she is resistant: linearity and conflict/ distancing metaphors. ‘To frame a shot’; ‘to edit a sequence’: such a language implies that reality is something linear and able to be delineated. Film and video are linear media in the sense that one frame follows another both in shooting and playback. In the edit suite one arranges ‘clips’ left to right. Narratively, through editing, the rushes can be made to branch and spiral into non-linear forms but materially (digitally) they cannot.

The lexicon of filming and editing is also a language of conflict, or of the enforcement of action on substrate: ‘shoot’, ‘capture’, ‘cut’, ‘splice’, ‘insert’. I am not suggesting that film-making is an inherently violent act, but there is a sense in which one imposes a form from the moment of filming which continues until the sequence is ‘locked down’. I wonder about the extent to which such language serves to at least distance the film-maker from that which she is filming.

Fragment 15: Rushes from my (unmade) film

Fortunately, there is at least one organic metaphor: usefully for a nest-building film-maker, the word ‘rushes’ denotes both the raw footage for a film/ video *and* grassy material suitable for nest-building.

Fragment 16: Rushes from my (made) nest

As I began to dwell more deeply, I had a sense that to be of value, my story must find the right form – one which had room for vulnerability and subjectivity and would bridge the distance between 'insider' and 'outsider'. My use of the term 'dwell' in this thesis is informed by an observation, made eloquently by ecocritic Greg Garrard, that dwelling 'is not a transient state; rather it implies the long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work'.[26] My task then was to render an embodied, 'entangled' way of being that did not have a beginning and an end. I felt the form should mirror the content.

Being an entangled film-maker came with its problems. With a camera in hand it is challenging to be fully present, especially in dealings with other people: the concern is to 'capture' the moment. The film is *about* something other than the film-maker. As such, life must fit inside the framing. Despite the film-maker knowing that she is entangled with what she is framing, if she is holding the camera, the frame cuts her out. This feels inauthentic, but neither would she want to be in front of the camera. How to acknowledge one's presence? Human relationships pay no heed to invisible or perceived dividing lines, be they across the camera or across characters. There are instances when attempts at framing-as-delineation begin to unravel, but such disruptions could be a generative entry point for a memoir. Let us look at a couple of examples:

In the chapter '*Selur* – Seal' (p.113) the narrator feels she is getting close to something 'authentic' for her film. It is the first time she is filming 'an Icelander' who is not a family member. It is also the first time she has been understood asking a question in Icelandic without mediation, and with it comes a sense of long-awaited agency. But in that same moment, a new complication arises regarding her positionality: by being in dialogue she is implicated in a relationship, no longer mute or invisible behind a camera attempting to 'capture' a reality that shows her as not in it.

Scene: Having noticed a shot raven hanging over a fence, the narrator and the 'Icelander' are having a conversation about ravens, an other-than-human co-dweller of their respective locales towards which they have differing feelings. The contested attitudes are fascinating and reveal something of the characters and their concerns. But she is the 'wrong' side of the camera; subject and object are confused, dissolved.

[26] Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), p. 117.

Or, it emerges, this situation might have been navigated more authentically if the camera were not there at all, if the moment was absent of formal and technological preoccupations; if it were allowed to be just two people exchanging different, but co-existing, narratives, on the same bit of rock in the north Atlantic. Written as memoir, this moment becomes a problem to unpick; a strength in itself: an attempt to dissolve subject and object becomes one of the defining characteristics of the prose. The camera is still present, but we can watch the problems it creates and how they are dealt with by the narrator.

Later, in the chapter entitled *Hvalurinn* – The Whale (p.170) the narrator is attempting to film an annual sheep roundup. By this point she has embraced her part in the dynamic of the filmed moment and altered her approach accordingly, becoming dialogic and acknowledging her presence, forgoing the 'observational' label. She has waited two years to film this roundup and wishes it, in part, to be a character portrait. In the interim, she has got to know the 'characters' as neighbours and learned enough Icelandic to speak to them when filming it. She has participated in a previous roundup to know loosely how it will run. In the event, the gently-spoken 'main character', a farmer-poet, is unexpectedly eclipsed by her father-in-law's antics.

The memoir chapter deals with this disruption by not showing the act of sheep gathering itself but rather the incidental events around it, and what they tell us.

Scene: The gathering crew are drinking coffee in the farmhouse kitchen waiting for the remaining few to arrive. The narrator describes a dream she had in the night. The simultaneous external setting of a farmhouse kitchen and the interior setting of a dream, are used as the context for her growing awareness of the mutability and unpredictability of this place, within the fact of the mutability and unpredictability of life in general, anywhere. She wonders whose story she is telling. She wonders if in fact underneath it all, it is her own story. Hers is a story of an uncertain identity which needs constantly reconstituting; of the need to find a way of existing and creating which can contain that constant process of becoming; of the need to find her own resilience.

The 'failed' filmed moments are thus opened up to explore far more than what was being filmed. The narrator allows you to look *through her eyes* whilst she is being uncertain, whilst she is questioning; whilst she is 'becoming-with'.

It is worth noting that my discovery in late 2018 of Orcadian film-maker, writer and poet Margaret Tait (1918-1999) – too late for film to be included in the creative component of this thesis – has opened up my understanding of what might be possible with film and video attempting to render multiple realties and uncertainties. Her work has helped me to own my multi-genre artist identity. She referred to her films as 'film poems' and was sceptical towards documentary as a tool to reveal the essence of things.[27] She wrote:

> The contradictory and paradoxical thing is that in a documentary the real things depicted are liable to lose their reality by being photographed in that 'documentary' way, and there's no poetry in that.[28]

'[T]hat "documentary" way', Tait seems to suggest, frames the world in front of the camera as a series of facts, while she prefers, as I do, to treat it as a series of questions. Relating to the necessary uncertainty I wished to express with my film-making, the sentiments expressed in her poem *Seeing's Believing and Believing's Seeing* resonate:

> I don't have to know what it's all about.
> That's not what I'm trying to know.
> It's the looking that matters.
> The being prepared to see what there is to see.[29]

Closely watching Tait's edited sequences has shown me what a reiterative questioning of a specific place and landscape might look like, in order to explore broader concerns about what it is to exist and to dwell. Tait also understood the importance of the language we use to describe our actions. She described her filming technique, not as 'shooting', but as 'breathing with the camera'; attempting to locate the essence of things from prolonged and intense observation.[30] Had Tait's 'breathing with the camera' been endorsed as a technique when I was studying film, I might have understood I was doing it.

For example, one occasion saw my (ex-) husband departing for an unknown duration on his fishing trawler. I had tried to call him as I saw the boat crossing the fjord, from my living room window. He could not answer the phone. It was unbearably sad. I fetched my camera and began filming – 'breathing with the camera' – mostly to transform a difficult moment

---

[27] *Margaret Tait: Poems, Stories and Writings* ed. by Sarah Neeley (Manchester: Carcanet, 2012), p. 9.
[28] Margaret Tait, 'Film-poem or poem-film: A few notes about Film and Poetry' in *Poem Film Film Poem,* 2 (1997), 4-5 (p. 4).
[29] *Margaret Tait: Poems, Stories and Writings* ed. by Sarah Neeley (Manchester: Carcanet, 2012), p. 109.
[30] Tamara Krikorian, '"On the Mountain" and "Land Makar": Landscape and Townscape in Margaret Tait's work', in Michael Maziere and Nina Danino (eds.), *The Undercut Reader: Critical Writings on Artists' Film and Video* (London: Wallflower, 2002) 103-105 (p.103).

into a generative one: I could see something essential in it. From my creative perspective, a boat crossing a frame – the window of a home – slowly right to left, with the sound of an unanswered phone, distilled the experience of a fisherman's wife: absence. This clip (or 'breath') is repurposed in the final chapter '*Í burtu* - In the Distance' (p. 205), which also imagines my husband looking back at the house where I am shooting that clip from the window.

The example above is an instance in which the presence of the camera sharpened my awareness and presence. In general, however, without a camera I could be more fully immersed, with all of my senses, and all of my language-learning synapses firing, making connections in lived moments. Much happened off-camera, becoming memories instead. As they accumulated, the rushes I had shot became a series of questions. Perhaps the camera and the edit suite were not the way to answer them. This technological presence was being resisted by a lifeworld which apparently wished to remain unfathomable. I pondered that perhaps there are no answers, that any answer landed on, even briefly, only begat more questions.

Before leaving Iceland I, and my narrator, got as far as gathering an armful of rushes. Each one made her look at the others differently, and at the world and her place in it, differently, until there came a time when it felt futile to line them up in a row; to edit a 'sequence', let alone a 'timeline'. The methods of film-making with which I was familiar were not fit for purpose. I had been gathering rather than hunting. I needed a container, not a weapon. Ultimately, I, and she, relinquished the identity of film-maker and put down the camera to bear witness. I left my rushes to become memories; something with more light, air, reflection and story in them. Later, when approaching this thesis, I returned to them asking: what happens when you can observe yourself 'failing' to make a film? What narratives can emerge when the rushes are used in another way?

What if, instead of shooting rushes and cutting them, I wove the memories they bore? What if a 'clip' became a 'thread'? What if a 'cut' became an 'entanglement'? What if I wove these rushes with words? What if I wove them in a way that the end of one did not have only to touch the beginning of another. The threads could loop and knot, layer and cross, intersect, snag, embrace, and finally come back around again into a well-made and resilient cyclical text-nest? One whose heft may survive harsh weathers. One which may have its parts used by others. One which may in time still fall apart and be remade again.

My response has been a journey from one genre to another – from ethnographic documentary film to memoir. New possibilities for metaphors and word constellations gained from learning Icelandic, entangled with this unfolding new world of matter, weather, relationships, and phenomena has given rise to experiments with text and language. Delving into my 'memory-rushes', I could move the 'camera' to a new position; move *my* position vis-à-vis the camera; zoom in on things which previously had been a background detail; ask new questions to see what meaning could be revealed. While I could not re-shoot (re-breathe) the actual video rushes, I could breathe my 'memory-rushes' again through text.

text (n.)

late 14c., "wording of anything written," from Old French *texte*, Old North French *tixte* "text, book; Gospels" (12c.), from Medieval Latin *textus* "the Scriptures, text, treatise," in Late Latin "written account, content, characters used in a document," from Latin *textus* "style or texture of a work," literally "thing woven," from past participle stem of *texere* "to weave, to join, fit together, braid, interweave, construct, fabricate, build," from PIE root ***teks-** "to weave, to fabricate, to make; make wicker or wattle framework."

> An ancient metaphor: thought is a thread, and the raconteur is a spinner of yarns -- but the true storyteller, the poet, is a weaver. The scribes made this old and audible abstraction into a new and visible fact. After long practice, their work took on such an even, flexible texture that they called the written page a *textus*, which means cloth. [Robert Bringhurst, "The Elements of Typographic Style"]

Fragment 17: *Texere* - 'to weave'. Source: Online Etymology Dictionary, 'text' https://www.etymonline.com/word/text#etymonline_v_10699 [accessed 20 April 2019].
The Oxford English Dictionary also lists the etymology of 'text' as having a root in the Latin *texĕre* – 'to weave': 'text, n.1.', in *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/200002 [accessed 1 May 2019]

4. Weaving a Nest of Worlds and Words

Having seen what my memoir-nest is made of, we see too how it responds eclectically to Haraway's and Le Guin's proposals for living and dying in the Anthropocene. It is an experiment made in rebearing metaphors, embracing diverse temporalities, and finding a generative shape of existence made in collaboration with Others, set within the highly original matrix of Iceland. Such complex thematic strands placed in unfamiliar relationships need to form a robust structure for what comes after. And as Le Guin's Carrier Bag Theory reminds us, the structure must be fit for purpose: to contain life. That is, open ended; able to embrace paradox and multiple realities; able to be added to, removed from, remade in a constant state of 'becoming-with' (Haraway 2016, p.40).

How does one build a world from rushes and fragments? Le Guin's need for a new shape of narrative is coeval with my film-maker narrator's needs for a new way to use her rushes. Haraway's 'entanglements' are a way to weave them. Now Timothy Ingold's ideas about weaving as a way of living will help us to understand the movement required to bind them to each other, and to the world. To keep weaving those memory-rushes into the fabric of myself; to stay curious; to 'stay with the trouble', that is my response.

In his essay 'On weaving a basket' Ingold uses a basket as a metaphor to think through a conceptual inversion.[31] He proposes that we see making as a modality of weaving rather than weaving as a modality of making. Weaving, he argues, is not only a craft technique, but more broadly, a way of being in the world:

> The notion of making, of course, defines an activity purely in terms of its capacity to yield a certain object, whereas weaving focuses on the character of the process by which that object comes into existence. To emphasise making is to regard the object as the expression of an idea; to emphasise weaving is to regard it as the embodiment of a *rhythmic movement*. Therefore, to invert making and weaving is also to invert idea and movement, to see the movement as truly generative of the object rather than merely revelatory of an object that is already present, in an ideal, conceptual or virtual form, in advance of the process that discloses it (Ingold 2000, p. 346) (my italics).

Perceived in this way, a basket, or its other-than-human-made equivalent – a nest – is not an object but a process of living. Ingold reminds us that the Latin verb *texere* means 'to weave'.[32] And appropriately, *texere* is the etymological source of the word 'text'.[33] Basket, nest, memoir: all emerge from this weaving.

Le Guin and Haraway are weavers in their approach. The work is never complete, and never theirs only. Le Guin believes that narration can be 'an active encounter with the environment by means of posing options and alternatives, and an enlargement of present reality by connecting it to the unverifiable past and the unpredictable future' (1989, pp. 44-45). Haraway, too, longs for the ongoingness of the story she begins: 'My stories are suggestive string figures at best; they long for a fuller weave that still keeps the patterns open, with ramifying attachment sites for storytellers yet to come' (2016, p.144).

---

[31] Tim Ingold, 'On Weaving a Basket' in *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in livelihood, dwelling and skill* (Oxon: Routledge, 2000), pp. 339-348.
[32] Tim Ingold, 'The textility of making', *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 34, 1 (2010) 91-102 (p. 92)
[33] 'text, n.1.', in *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/200002 [accessed 1 May 2019]

Inspired by Haraway's acknowledgement of sources conventionally excluded in academic citation, and Ingold's notion that a life lived in connection is an act of weaving, I underline here that the inspiration for the content and form of this memoir came for the most part from the act of dwelling in the place itself; from the way in which place and I and 'I' became continuous: from the spark that illuminated two quartz pebbles when I knocked them together; from the tap of the raven's beak on my roof if I forgot to put bones out for him in winter; from the shape and taste of a guillemot's egg; from light and weather that changed each and every minute; from yearly natural and cultural cycles which each time revealed something new, and quite different, to what I thought I had understood; from feeling my capacity to stand the cold increase, without a change in my body's shape, as I ate the fat of sheep and seals; from understanding silence to be full of sounds that are not me.

Weaving is an appropriate analogy for my own writing and world-making and for the way in which Iceland exists in relationship with me. As an island, the place that is Iceland with its human and other-than-human inhabitants, has been and is still characterised by movements back and forth. I have heard stories of such movements: of settlers, slaves, outlaws, immigrants, Basque fishermen and Danish merchants. I have witnessed such movements: of pink-footed geese, arctic terns, puffins, guillemots; of snow building up and melting away; of tides; of light. The island expands as magma rises and shrinks as the sea erodes the coastline. As the glaciers retreat and sea levels rise, the land springs back up after millennia buried by ice. It, too, is in a continual state of 'becoming-with' (Haraway 2016, p.40).

In *Staying with the Trouble,* Haraway assures us that 'Good stories reach into rich pasts to sustain thick presents to keep the story going for those who come after' (Haraway 2016, p.125). This memoir project was not a 'literary' endeavour, in the sense that I did not live the experience with a book in mind. Nor did I read the texts I am drawing upon here to inform the raw materials of my creative writing. The creative writing came first and foremost from the place. Then I went in search of literary 'ancestors'. This memoir arose from a circumstance peculiar to me: having to relinquish familiar ways of being in the world, and to find threads from which I could make something new. Le Guin's 'container' and Haraway's 'entanglements' have been a resonant language with which to describe this work of 'sympoiesis' (*SWT*, p.32-33). The pasts it reaches into are indeed rich. A 'life story'– a memoir with creature and matter and silence and space in it – is what I have woven, in all its writhing complexity (Le Guin 1989, p.168).

(Brown 1974) to identify eight nesting pairs of ravens. Of this group, four pairs used the same nest, after some reconstruction and repair, in both 1976 and 1977. Two pairs built a new nest and attempted to renest the same year after nest failure and two pairs changed nest location in 1977 after successfully nesting in 1976.

Nest construction.—Nest construction that I observed (N = 17) resembled that reported by Kulczycki (1973). After a territory was established in late February (Stiehl 1981), both partners participated in nest construction or repair. Sagebrush and greasewood were placed and woven until a large basket (20 cm × 40 cm diameter) lined with cattle hair, shredded juniper bark, and grasses was formed (Fig. 1). I observed both members carrying these materials to the nest site, but only noted the female actually building the basket.

Although the average diameter of 46 nests was 40.5 ± 4.5 cm, this dimension seemed to be related to the type of substrate used. Nests on rimrock ledges usually filled the space available. Nests in buildings and trees were generally larger than rimrock nests.

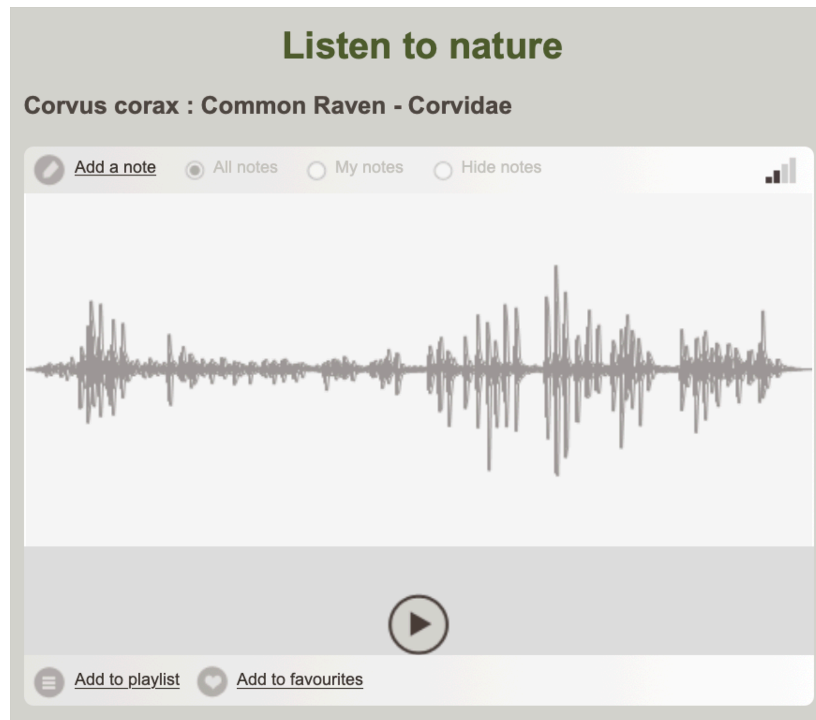
Normal compacting of the nest by the chicks and adults, and fouling of the nest by the chicks, as well as seasonal deterioration, necessitated reconstruction prior to reuse. Reconstruction was also observed when the same nest was used twice in the same nesting season, after failure of the first clutch (N = 4), even though the nest appeared to be structurally sound. The reconstruction was similar to new construction; however, no new soil was added to the existing structure.

Fragment 18: On the reuse of ravens' nests. Source: https://sora.unm.edu/sites/default/files/journals/wilson/v097n01/p0078-p0087.pdf [accessed 14 January 2019]

Had this been a memoir primarily about a marriage, I encountered the raven's nest in that glass case, seen at the beginning of this chapter, when everything had already fallen apart. As it is a memoir which engages in myriad relationships with Others, the narrator instead encounters the nest in a state of ongoingness. She, and I, tugged at one of its rushes and went on to make something new that could live out in the world. All of us – the raven, she and I – were/are having to make the best home we could/can in these challenging times, in an act of interspecies belonging. In the memoir there is a shift in and out of who 'I' am – you, we, they – as I become aware of my own porosity and interdependency with Others. As the narrator weaves and reweaves, the memoir moves away from merely human concerns to those of place, land, weather, climate and other species.

Between her the film-maker and me the writer, over the course of that time spent looking and feeling, and weaving worlds, the metaphors used have been reborne. The implications of this rebearing for her, and my, way of being in the world are profound and ongoing, and I switch here from the first to the third person, and the past to the present tense interchangeably and involuntarily, as I remember, reflect, imagine, examine, re-examine then, and re-examine now knowing then. We are not separate her and I. We are entangled, each push-pulling on the other, reconstituting our memories and ideas, weaving a raven's nest of words and life and love and grief and matter together.

A raven's nest seems a fitting metaphor for what I have done with my rushes. By writing I weave together threads and fragments in a 'rhythmic movement' (Ingold 2000, p.346). The shape of what that movement makes is a container. It is circular, cyclical. There is no beginning and no end. It does not frame; it incorporates. It is both fragmentary and robust; wildly ragged and intricate; highly structured yet concave and able to hold; fragile and strong. It is a shape that can contain living and dying and the messy, grunting spaces in between.



Fragment 19: Raven call (digital thesis: click to play). Source: Reg Tassell, *Corvus corax: Common Raven – Corvidae*, online audio recording, British Library Sounds , 25 October 1971, https://sounds.bl.uk/Environment/Listen-to-Nature/022M-LISTNAT00222-0001V0 [accessed 3 March 2019]

Helen Macdonald, author of *H is for Hawk* (2014) ponders on such co-creation between birds and humans:

> It's satisfying to consider the incorporation of human detritus into the creations of birds, but it's troubling, too. *What have they made out of what we have made of this world?* …[T]hese are nests that gesture towards hope, as birds use our things for their own ends, making our technologies redundant, slowed down, static, full of meaning that is no longer entirely our own.
>
> …Their meaning is always woven from things that are partly bird and partly human and as the cup or wall of the nest is raised, it raises, too, questions about our own lives. Do birds plan like us, or think like us, or really know how to make knots, or slap beaks full of mud in series, or is this really instinct? Does the structure they're making begin with some abstract form, a mental image to which the bird plans, rather

than thinking, step-by-step, there. That is where that goes? These are questions that pull on us.[34]

A raven's nest: a kenning for a new kind of narrative. Part human, part animal, part vegetal, part detritus of the Anthropocene; necessarily uncertain. With a form both inner and outer, woven and created, such a dwelling place connects the narrator to a series of threads which this critical reweaving has drawn in and traced: forward, back, in, out.

Fragment 20: My raven neighbour on repeat fly-by to look at a newly painted *Trompe l'oeil* mural of the valley we shared.

[34] Helen Macdonald, 'On Nests and Eggs', in *A Natural History of Nest Building* ed. by James Lingwood and Phoebe Roberts (London: Artangel, 2017). (Published to accompany the Artangel exhibition 'Natural Selection – Andy Holden & Peter Holden')
See: https://www.artangel.org.uk/project/natural-selection/ [accessed 3 March 2019]

More moving still are the ways in which birds can develop their building works through time. There are gyr falcons in Greenland whose nests have been renewed for so long that they have massive guano deposits in the footings. The carbon dating of some of this debris suggests that the oldest have been continuously occupied for 2,500 years.

Occasionally this avian fidelity to place acquires cultural significance. There is a steep cliff ledge in Cressbrook Dale, Derbyshire, called Ravencliffe Cave, presumably for its long occupancy. When ravens returned to the region after a manmade absence of more than a century and a half, among the first sites that they nested was on the old ledge named after their ancestors.

Follow Country diary on Twitter: @gdncountrydiary

Topics

Birds / **Country diary**

Spring / Animals / Wildlife / features

Fragment 21: On the longevity of avian dwelling places. Source: Mark Cocker, 'Corvids Build Castles in the Sky', *Guardian* online, 2 May 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/may/02/corvids-build-castles-sky-country-diary [accessed 14 January 2019].

Writing the Nature of North

Redefining North

The North is urgently in need of a space on the page in which it is not treated as a vast wilderness to be discovered, a site of unexploited resources, or a place of elemental extremes to be conquered. Common ideas and images of the North remain characterised by what feminist geographer Gillian Rose asserts is a dominant masculinist gaze on space and place, and indeed the production of knowledge.[35] This gaze and its influence is not exclusive to Britain, where it has been examined comprehensively by Davidson (2016) and Spufford (1996). It has also been explored in distinct lines of scholarship in Canada (Grace 2001), The United States (Bloom 1993), and Iceland (Ísleifsson and Chartier (eds.) 2011).[36]

My idea of 'North' is a terrain of sensuous experience which engenders new ways to think and be in the world. Because of its 'Otherness', Iceland allowed me to recognise that the North is a mirror for possible futures elsewhere. The sparseness of man-made/ artificial construction where I lived, coupled with the agency afforded to my own existence, made seasonal cycles, patterns of cause and effect, and many aspects of multispecies living and dying clearly visible. My 'entangled' life there showed how inextricably linked I am not only to pasts and the here and now, but also to those elsewheres and those futures (Haraway 2016, p.4). Haraway, too, recognises that:

> A geophysical, geopolitical storm of unprecedented proportions is changing the practices of living and dying across the North. The coalitions of peoples and critters facing this storm are critical to the possibilities of the earth's powers of resurgence (2016, p.73).

Understood in this way, the North becomes a metaphor – a 'raven's nest' writ large. Having traced a potentially useful narrative shape and composition for a memoir of the Anthropocene in *Making Worlds with Raven,* here I redefine North for the more convivial purposes of living-, dying- and becoming-with (Haraway 2016, p. 40). What, then, is meant

[35] Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p.6.
[36] Peter Davidson, *The Idea of North,* 2nd edn (London: Reaktion Books, 2016); Francis Spufford, *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination* 2nd edn (London: Faber & Faber, 2003); Sherrill E. Grace, *Canada and the Idea of North* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill – Queen's University Press, 2001); Lisa Bloom, *Gender On Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson and Daniel Chartier (eds.) *Iceland and Images of the North* (Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2011).

by *my* ‘North’, and what is it to write this North? In *The Idea of North* (2016) Peter Davidson proposes that:

> Everyone has a different north, their own private map of the emotional – indeed the moral – geography of north and south. In everyone’s mind there is a line drawn across the maps, known to that person alone, of where ‘the north’, in the sense that means more than ‘north of where I happen to be’, begins. As a descriptor of place, ‘north’ is shifting and elusive, yet, paradoxically, it is a term that evokes a precise – even passionate – response in most people.[37]

Iceland is a country likely to align with many readers’ ideas of North, whatever their parameters – not least due to the images, temperatures, matters and surfaces the noun evokes: Ice; land. In *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (1993) Lisa Bloom suggests that in Britain, the imaginative hold of the North that still grips to this day – as the *beyond;* a wilderness; a place of unbounded space yet to be discovered, mapped, traversed and penetrated; a site of quest, extreme cold and physical and moral challenge – was engendered particularly by the 1845 Franklin expedition to penetrate the Northwest Passage, and the fourteen years of rescue expeditions which followed.[38] From these issued a glut of heroic literature characterised by ‘a romantic notion of self-sacrifice’ which ‘connoted the spirit of the nation’ at the time (Bloom 1993, p. 118). Even once the remains of Franklin’s crew were found and that era of polar expedition had ended, these narratives were perpetuated as a ‘literary attempt to transport the heroic past fictionally into the present’ and their influence lasted well into the twentieth century (1993, p. 121).

Meanwhile, in America explorers such as Robert Peary and Vilhjalmur Stefansson were producing narratives of North that were part of a scientific tradition focused on performance and achievement, as they looked to the future and developed tools and methodologies for successful expansion and exploitation of resources. The emphasis of these narratives is on exteriority rather than moral virtue which characterises the British narratives (Bloom 1993, p. 128). With regard to both iterations of the masculinist gaze – the heroic and the scientific – she points out that, ‘The two narratives…have more in common than one might expect from such different genres. In both, authority resides in the *effacement of the speaking and experiencing subject*’ (1993, p. 128) (my italics).

[37] Peter Davidson, *The Idea of North* 2nd edition (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), p. 23.
[38] Lisa Bloom, *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p.118

Such narratives thus demonstrate a masculinist rationality which feminists have argued pervade the very notion of reason as it developed from the seventeenth century. This, asserts Gillian Rose, is exemplified by the founding texts of philosophy, history, science and political theory (1993, p. 6). She writes that:

> Masculinist rationality is a form of knowledge which assumes a knower who believes he can separate himself from his body, emotions, values, past, and so on, so that he and his thought are autonomous, context-free and objective (1993, p.7).

The assumption of an untainted objectivity is dangerous as it 'allows this kind of rationality to claim itself as universal' (Rose 1993, p.7). That is to say, the narrator of such knowledges frames 'reality' and 'the human perspective' as an unproblematised 'fact'. On the other hand, encountering narratives of what it is like to be a woman in the North, open to being changed by it, is a rare phenomenon. Titles do not spring to mind, unless one is a specialist in such literature. Given that ideas of North are still generally refracted through particular, mainly masculinist, lenses, my redefinition of North in the context of my own experience as a woman seeks to subvert such hegemony and hold space for other narratives.

My own ideas about the North were refined by living for several years in Iceland and spending time in other countries and regions which have historical and cultural links to it. I was a regular visitor to Iceland before moving there. It was the furthest north I had ever travelled, and I was exposed in various seasons to particularities of light, weather, and landscape, whose mutability I had not experienced anywhere else. These visits informed what was then my naïve definition of North: a remote island on the edge of Europe; a pristine, scenic place, with a 'raw', 'wild', sparsely-populated landscape.

Making a life there, as opposed to visiting, helped me to recognise how intensely *subjective* were my encounters: 'knowledge' was a shifting and elusive thing. Over time, I experienced the nuance, paradox and complexity that longevity offers up. I experienced Iceland not as the 'edge' of anything, but rather as a 'centre'. In fact, I found it is full of many centres, with my experiencing body at their nucleus, just as any Other's body is the nucleus of their 'centres'. Because of where I dwelled – in the rural Westfjords – the 'centres' I refer to here are not urban centres but centres of sensuous experience and gathering. My North is a rural one. The fact that it is *inhabited* with an active community and culture subverts stereotypes of a rural North being equivalent to an empty wilderness.

I was a participant in a quiet, cyclical culture of food rearing, production and consumption still easily visible through yearly sheep gatherings and slaughters of the family flock. At the same time, I was embroiled in capitalist patterns of consumption and disposal much like anywhere else. I found that far from this North being 'pristine', the polluting shadow of global capitalism was increasingly evident, though not always *visible*. For example, the memoir chapter *Svartfuglsegg* ('black-birds-egg') (p.164) describes the narrator's Icelandic family engaged in their yearly ritual of eating guillemot eggs at the start of summer. These are later found to contain potentially harmful levels of carcinogenic Polychlorinated Biphenyls, and their consumption is discouraged by scientists. Despite the prevalence of such Anthropocenic cascade effects, Iceland's 'pristine nature' and 'wild beauty' are being commodified for an increasingly rampant tourism industry, within which I worked as a guide for cruise ship tourists.

Though broadly geographically defined as a European North encompassing Scotland, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Greenland, and Scandinavia – all of which are historically and culturally linked through Viking expansion – as an idea, my North is not strictly limited to a geographical area.[39] Rather, it emerges from subjective, sensuous, relational experience. Its characteristics focus on the material, luminous, phenological and cultural qualities of the lived environment at high latitudes and their effects on the body, on quotidian activities, and on emotions and thinking. It informs a different way of seeing and being: lived experience as a subjective female body, an outsider-insider attempting to make a life. Spending much time alone, living, listening, working and growing, and learning languages in such a North, allows for different knowledges to be produced: 'To know, that is, with the knowledge that is a process of living' (Shepherd 2011, p. 1).

Events or connections which yielded such knowledges were also often invisible or not immediately graspable. For example, I found that in Icelandic the silence between people was as significant as the words. But only in understanding the words and relationships between people could I begin to understand the meanings of their silences. I found Iceland to be a simultaneously fragile and resilient dwelling place where human and non-human Others live, to return to Donna Haraway's phrase, 'at stake in each other's company' (Haraway 2016, p. 39). To get any truthful sense of it seemed to involve a commitment of

[39] *Nordic Narratives of Nature and the Environment: Ecocritical Approaches to Northern European Literatures and Cultures*, ed. by Reinhard Hennig and others (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), pp. 3-4.

time, a genuine relinquishment of objectives and a willingness to engage in relationships without necessarily understanding them.

Over the course of my research I wondered whether there were other non-fiction narratives of North with which my experience resonated – in which a woman narrator *was* a 'speaking and experiencing subject' (Bloom 1993, p.128). I discovered a small, under-recognised 'ancestry' of such texts which attend to the authors' relational experience of the North with varying degrees and types of entanglement. These include: Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters written in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (first published 1796); Isobel Wylie Hutchison's *On Greenland's Closed Shore: The Fairyland of the Arctic* (1930); Christiane Ritter's *A Woman in the Polar Night* (1938 German original *Eine Frau Erlebt Die Polarnacht*; 1954 English translation; 2010 new English edition with an introduction by Lawrence Millman); Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain* (completed 1945, published 1977, re-published with a foreword by Robert Macfarlane in 2011); Gretel Ehrlich's *This Cold Heaven: Seven Seasons In Greenland* (2002); Jay Griffiths' *Wild: An Elemental Journey* (2006); Sara Wheeler's *The Magnetic North: Travels in the Arctic* (2010); Sarah Moss' *Names for the Sea: Strangers in Iceland* (2012); Rebecca Solnit's *The Faraway Nearby* (2013); Amy Liptrot's *The Outrun* (2016), and Nancy Campbell's *The Library of Ice* (2018). In addition, the film, writing and poetry oeuvre of Margaret Tait (especially those works set in her native Orkney), and the way in which they inform one another, have particular resonance with my film-maker narrator's concerns about representing North.

Icelandic author Oddný Eir's 'autobiographical-fiction' *Land of Love and Ruins* (2016) is also an enlightening contribution to women's narratives of North based in lived experience.[40] For reasons of scope and what I deem to be the most appropriate forms for Anthropocenic narratives, this thesis focusses on creative non-fiction, so I will not discuss Eir's text in detail here. Nonetheless, as a work set mostly in Iceland during a time period which overlaps with my memoir, with a woman narrator similar in age to my narrator – it has been a useful mirror to my own experience as an outsider/insider in Iceland. Like *The Raven's Nest, Land of Love and Ruins* explores questions of belonging to a world in flux and upheaval but as an Icelander, Eir's text-nest is made of different threads. She is able to explore her questions through her direct connection with an ancestry that goes back to the settlement of the island.

---

[40] Oddný Eir, *Land of Love and Ruins*, trans. by Philip Roughton (Brooklyn: Restless Books, 2016). 'The Female Writer is Political: An Interview with Oddný Eir', *The Common: A Modern Sense of Place* (2017) https://www.thecommononline.org/the-female-writer-is-political-an-interview-with-oddny-eir/ [accessed 6 June 2018].

This connection is evoked, among other things, through conversations with her mother, grandmother and brother, who is an archaeologist – a device by which she muses on historic shapes of dwelling and relationships.

Within this broader ancestry, I have identified in Ritter, Shepherd, Griffiths and Tait a particular lineage for my creative non-fiction. Their North echoes my redefinition as a terrain of sensuous experience, and characteristic threads of their work are found in various weaves in *The Raven's Nest*. Their work shares with my memoir a humble engagement with humans and Others. Their narrators are uncertain: they dwell in and are changed by the place. Their voices do not frame, colonise or commodify, but question and become-with (Haraway 2016, p.40). The texts hold space for a multi-vocal reality, be that through prosody, poetry, rhythm, shape or language. Nothing is resolved or overcome, for that was never the texts' intention. It is on these texts that I focus here: Christiane Ritter's memoir *A Woman in the Polar Night*; Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain*; Jay Griffiths' *Wild: An Elemental Journey*; and a selection of Margaret Tait's film oeuvre set in Orkney, in which 'documentary clarity merges with experimental form' (Reynolds in Todd & Cook (eds.) 2004, p. 64).

In relation to these texts and my own I shall discuss a selection of the significant tropes I have identified as contributing to an alternative narrative of North: a dwelling perspective, non-linear structure and rupture, a sensuous engagement with place, and language as an animating force. I shall demonstrate how our texts produce knowledges that are arguably more authentic to an experienced reality. A brief exploration of the extent to which such writing might be termed 'feminine', drawing on Hélène Cixous' *Écriture Feminine*, finds its way instead to Abi Andrews' 'manifesto' for a rewilded novel as more relevant to Anthropocenic concerns. 'A Novel is a Medicine Bundle: Writing from Down in the Dirt' updates how a woman (or man) might write themselves as we move away from human exceptionalism. I find Andrews' proposals for a novel are generatively transposed to creative non-fiction. The knowledges yielded by the sensing bodies living in these entangled narratives, which treat the world as 'home', are urgently required for our times of catastrophic climate change and environmental degradation, felt keenly in the polar regions. For narratives of the Anthropocene, a redefinition of North is important and foregrounding such an ancestry is useful and overdue.

Tropes for an alternative narrative of North

1. The 'wild' as 'home'

Arguably the most distinctive trope is a 'dwelling perspective' (Ingold 2000, p.153), in which the narrator is entangled in reciprocal relationships with humans and Others, situated in a 'home'. 'From this perspective,' writes Ingold, 'the world continually comes into being around the inhabitant, and its manifold constituents take on significance through their incorporation into a regular pattern of life activity' (p.153). The 'home' might be a hut or a house, as in Ritter's and my own cases. Or as in the case of much of Tait's oeuvre and Shepherd's *The Living Mountain*, it might represent more broadly a sense of intimacy with a landscape or community in which one has spent one's life. In Griffith's case, journeying as she did for seven years to write *Wild: An Elemental Journey*, such a perspective is characterised by a sensibility; a gesture towards familiarity, where 'home' is her own body. Whatever form this 'home' takes, an emotional investment is involved. Such narratives are not characterised by heroism, by straightforward motion through space, nor by a colonising gaze.

From the start, Jay Griffiths declares her approach as an act of redress to the arrogance of Euro-American approaches to writing and knowledge production which exclude the expertise of those who dwell in a place (Griffiths 2008, p.3). In the chapter 'Wild Ice', she critiques the associated treatment of the Arctic as an empty wasteland or an enemy to be overcome, and counters: 'It is cold according to the facts of its nature, not as an act of malice. And it is full of cold integrity' (p. 106). She wants 'nothing to do with the heroics of the "solo expedition"' (p. 3). Spending much time 'walking and watching' (p. 107), she learns instead from the indigenous people she meets 'who have a different word for wilderness: *home*' (p.3). Having made the journeys in this book partly to deal with a severe depression, 'inhabiting' these places had a fundamental impact on her relationship with her own 'wildness': a truer sense of herself. She writes, 'In the end – a strangely sweet result – I came back to a wild home' (p.3).

Treating 'the wild' as 'home' does not imply domesticity or a limitation of movement through the landscape, though both may be part of the life narrated. Rather, an inhabited experience makes space for a particular depth of attention. The neighbourly engagement

with human and other-than-human communities on whom the narrators depend, likely to be central to such an experience, can be made central to the narrative.

Figure 1: The Ritters' hut. (Digital thesis: click on image to explore environs). Source: https://www.spitzbergen.de/wp-content/panoramas/spitzbergen/41-Woodfjord-Liefdefjord/Ritterhuette_DE/Ritterhuette.html [accessed May 1 2019]

Figure 2: The Ritters' hut - interior. Source: https://www.spitzbergen.de/fotos-panoramen-videos-und-webcams/spitzbergen-panoramen/ritterhuette.html#aussenpano_2 [accessed May 1 2019]

In Christiane Ritter's *A Woman in the Polar Night,* the narrator's 'home' is a ten-foot square hut in Spitsbergen (now Svalbard), shared with her hunter-trapper husband and a Norwegian hunter. She throws the nature of this home and context into relief with observations like 'the white snow façade no longer bears any resemblance to a house – it is much more like a large, artistically-folded table napkin.'[41] Mundane details demonstrate the extraordinary circumstances of her daily existence: 'The clothes, which I hang up at once, freeze stiff as boards and my hands turn to ice' (2010, p.124). Ritter consciously includes events that might have disrupted the trajectory of a heroic narrative. Travelling with sleigh dogs, for example, she notes that they stop regularly to defecate, making the journey less smooth than it might be: 'These are the incidents of a sleigh journey that you don't read about in books about the Arctic, I think to myself.' (p.178).

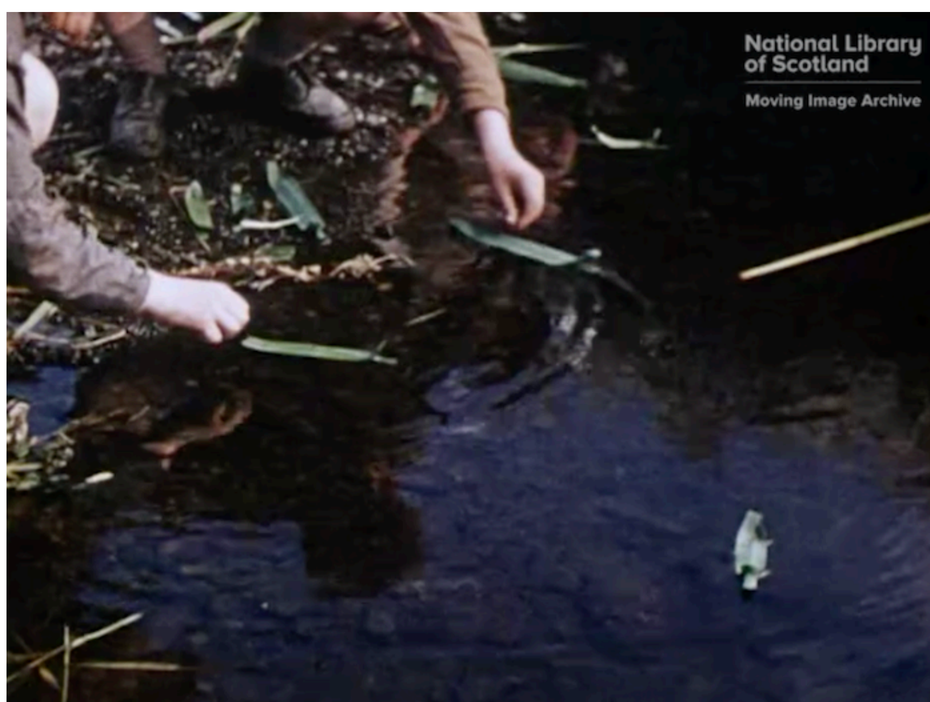
For Nan Shepherd the Cairngorm massif of Scotland – the living mountain of her title – *is* her home. She spends her life based in a village in its foothills, and the Cairngorms are the backyard in which she spends most of her spare time engaged in a 'traffic of love'.[42] They become a space of familiarity – both thoroughly known and engaged in intimate relationship. In favouring intimacy over summits, we perceive through Shepherd's eyes and through her whole body how to go *into* the mountain or be *with* the mountain 'as one visits a friend with no intention but to be with him' (Shepherd 2011, p.15). This is a quietly radical contrast to the more common sense of being *on* the mountain – a relationship which she considers to be engaged only with a superficial layer of her 'total mountain' which embraces 'scree, soil and water, moss, grass, flower and tree, insect, bird and beast, wind, rain and snow' (p.105). For Shepherd, knowledge is not produced only by traversing vast tracts of land: '[…] for attentive observation the body must be still' (p.13).

Margaret Tait, also a Scot, made films about where she lived, whether in Edinburgh or her native Orkney. Notably her camerawork does not make use of the more conventional tripod-mounted lateral pan taking in the breadth of the landscape, which arguably represents a colonising gaze.[43] It is characterised instead by many short, handheld clips, exploring her

[41] Christiane Ritter, *A Woman in the Polar Night* (English translation – 2nd edition) (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2010), p.99.
[42] Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain.* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011), p. xliii
[43] In 'Shooting in the Dark, Notes on Preparing to Film in the Field' documentary film-maker Peter Thompson refers to the limited zone of conventional camerawork – 'a thin band transversing the globe at four feet from the earth and ending around five feet nine inches' – as 'the Viewosphere' (p. 2) http://carbonfarm.us/365/readings/What_I_Learned_in_a_Hut.pdf [accessed 2 Feb, 2019]

world in depth or close up.[44] We feel the presence of her body in place, and an engagement with those bodies who have stood there before hers. Film-maker Lucy Reynolds writes, 'the intense focus of her camera on the surfaces and contours of the land itself uncovers not only the contemplative natural beauty in its details, but a sense of the histories embedded there' (Reynolds in Todd & Cook (eds.) 2004, p. 59). Whether it is a landscape (for example *Orquil Burn* (1955)) or a building in which she has lived or worked (for example *Place of Work* (1976)), Tait attempts to know it profoundly with her camera. For Tait, making films was a way of being in the world.

In *Orquil Burn* we journey with Tait up the length of the 'burn' (a stream) from sea to source – the narrative thread which stitches together a patchwork of visual canvasses depicting the lives to which the burn relates.[45] Tait's voiceover, familiar with what and whom she encounters, simultaneously narrates its 'story'. From the nature of the water's flow and its powering of a distillery waterwheel, to the ecology of wildflowers growing beside it, the brown trout living within it, and the farmer and his dog that live beside it ('Uncle Peter – with elderly Spot'), the burn is shown as 'a meeting place between the different rhythms of time in Orkney's natural world and its people' (Reynolds in Todd & Cook (eds.) 2004, p.60): A place which Ingold, from his 'dwelling perspective', would term a 'taskscape' (Ingold 2000, p. 195).



[44] Lucy Reynolds, 'Margaret Tait: marks of time' in Peter Todd and Benjamin Cook (eds.) *Subjects and Sequences: A Margaret Tait Reader* (London: LUX, 2004), p.59
[45] National Library of Scotland Moving Image Archive, *Orquil Burn*, https://movingimage.nls.uk/film/6221 [accessed 3 November, 2018]

Figure 3: Still from *Orquil Burn.* Source: National Library of Scotland Moving Image Archive https://movingimage.nls.uk/film/6221 [accessed May 1 2019]

In her essay 'Margaret Tait: marks of time', artist and writer Lucy Reynolds remarks, 'In Tait's images of Orkney the land is portrayed neither as a backdrop to human agency, as in narrative cinema, nor as the remote and uninhabited spaces of Michael Snow's film *La Region Centrale* (1971) […] Tait's Orkney is an active space in which the people who inhabit it are embedded […]' (Reynolds in Todd & Cook (eds) 2004, p.59)

Such familiarity allows Tait to get beyond the surface of objects, and for everyday objects or phenomena to take on metaphorical significance. Alex Pirie writes of Tait's style:

> [H]er films are not mere exercises in perception. Her film images are accessible (a thistle is invariably a thistle), they are of the everyday, and, at one level, a presentation of things as they are. But in their framing, in their rhythmical patterning, in their duration, these images offer a vision of the mystery and ambiguity inherent in so-called common objects (2000, p.3).

She displays, Pirie continues, 'what Alfred Kazin, writing of Simone Weil, called "a loving attentiveness to all the living world".'[46]

[46] Alex Pirie, 'Margaret Tait Film Maker 1918-1999: Indications Influences Outcomes', *Poem Film Film Poem,* 6 (2000), 1-12 (p.3).

Figure 4: Winter from my kitchen window

Much of the narrative of *The Raven's Nest* is based from a house that the narrator shares with her partner, near to his family with whom they are closely involved. As such, at one level it describes her experience of making a life and building a relationship at sixty-six degrees North. She must tend to the realities of existence, whether this be renovating the house, meeting the challenges of her relationship, attempting to grow vegetables, finding work, or dealing with administrative affairs. These encounters with land, weather, materials, emotions, tradespeople, bureaucrats, and family, reveal much about the place, the way in which lives are lived there, and the futility of imposing any of her own notions of sense-making in such a place.

The narrator's inhabitation of this world lends the narrative a depth and longevity which underpins her investment in this corner of Iceland. Journeys are taken away from the house, but with the promise of return they avoid assuming the potentially superficial character of an expedition. They intend rather to serve as fragments contributing to a whole relationship to place. This house becomes her home; her domain – the one place she can to some extent 'control' in an otherwise alien context. Consequently, her unfolding relationship with this home becomes as significant as the relationship with her partner, emphasised by his long periods of absence.

Figure 5: *Frost rósir:* a view from my house

Looking from the inside out, the apertures of the house frame new discoveries. 'The Frozen Bell' describes the narrator's psychological journey through a long winter – her first 'polar night' – and the phenomena which made it bearable:

> On cold nights Bjarni's workshop window, single glazed, is a canvass for a most delicate patterning of ice which Icelanders call *frost-rósir* – 'ice roses'. Crystals form into quills and replicate themselves with abandon across the windowpane like a translucent feather bed (p. 94).

The depth of the narrator's relationship with her home lends symbolic heft to the material house. Outer life reflects inner life. In 'Breaking Up', realising her marriage is over, the house acts as a symbol for her own need to strip back to basics and to situate her circumstance in a rich past of 'old news' (p.12):

> I feel the need to do something physical, and aesthetic, to mark the change. In front of me, I peel decades of wallpaper, hessian, and old newspaper from the walls in my study, to get back to the bare bones of this place – this flat-pack house from Norway, erected in 1902. We know exactly who erected it, and we know that his son's wife lived in it for 70 years before we became the current owners. It may be that couple's history I am peeling away now […]' (p.12).

By dwelling, one becomes part of a continuum between pasts, presents and futures, which de-centres the narrator into a broader and deeper story of place.

2. Non-linear structure

These works have in common a non-linear structure. 'Making Worlds with Raven' explained the relevance of imagining beyond the conventional arc structure in narratives of the Anthropocene. *The Raven's Nest* has two simultaneous non-linear structures, which I have described as comprising a 'container'/ cycle shape and a recursive weaving motion. This dual structure is notably shared by Ritter's *A Woman in the Polar Night* and Margaret Tait's short film *Place of Work* (1976). In all three, the cycles depicted are seasonal, led by the natural world.

A Woman in the Polar Night traces a full cycle of the polar light (light-dark-light). It is written in the style of a diary, taking us from her arrival: 'We unpack. How many days it takes is difficult to say. For here there are no days because there are no nights' (Ritter 2010, p.41) through 'the great eventide of nature' (p.77) and the long winter that follows with its 'furious drumfire of a hurricane' (p. 86), landscapes 'enacted in tones of the purest blue' (p.100) and 'unending darkness and profound quiet' (p.136) to a 'world of glittering whiteness, full of sunshine, day and night' the following Spring (p.196). It also traces the seasonal cycle's associated emotional cycles, sometimes in unexpected configurations. Digging her hut from becoming buried by a snowstorm, Ritter muses, 'For the first time in my life I experience the joy of struggling with something stronger than myself' (p. 95).

Tait's *Place of Work* follows a seasonal cycle at the closure of her life cycle with her childhood home, in which she has recently been working and which she is now being forced to leave. Tait describes 'flowers budding, flowering, turning into pods and being shaken and broken by the wind. As the trees are battered bare, we return to the editing bench, overhearing that the telephone is to be left connected 'until Monday''.[47]

The structure of *The Raven's Nest* is a variation on a cycle. It has an overarching cyclicality in that it has no 'beginning' and no 'end': the first chapter 'Breaking Up' which addresses

[47] National Library of Scotland Moving Image Archive, *Place of Work,* https://movingimage.nls.uk/film/6230 [accessed 18 February 2019]

the narrator's imminent divorce, is temporally conjoined with the last chapter, '*Í burtu* – In the Distance', both time-stamped August 2014. Had this been a divorce memoir following a conventional narrative arc, the actions described in both chapters take place at what would be considered the 'end'. Here the intention is different: knowing from the start that the relationship will break down, the reader may move through the text experiencing many kinds of connections and ruptures. Arriving at the final chapter the brokenness has been woven in. New beginnings are beginning; new possibilities opening. Here too, the seasonal cycles are mirrored by emotional cycles, with depression being a part of the winter and melancholy a productive force. Energy returns, and spirits lift at the return of the light (see 'The Frozen Bell' (p.87)).

A distinctive Anthropocenic structural trope of *The Raven's Nest* is rupture. Living in times when taken-for-granted realities can disappear in an instant, the narrative does not settle for long into a rhythm or resolution, before something disrupts it. Such ruptures manifest, for example, as a volcanic eruption as in 'Breaking Up' (p. 11) and *'Gos* – Eruption' (p. 66), as an unexpected death in '*Krummi*' (p. 79) and '*Þakkið* – 'Roof' (p. 123), and as a sudden shift in perception in '*Mataræði* – Diet' (p. 39), '*Snuið* – The Turn' (p.145), and '*Í burtu* – In the Distance' (p. 205). Such ruptures afford an underlying instability to the narrative, which is nonetheless held by its resilient structure.

Within this overarching cycle is the narrative's weaving motion between England and Iceland, before the narrator commits to making a life in Iceland, and as she ultimately disentangles herself from that life. It is not until '*Flýtja*' that she moves to Iceland. '*Hvalurinn* – The Whale' is the last moment at which the narrator is permanently based in Iceland, before becoming a seasonal migrant again. This is only suggested through gaps in the timestamping and reference to periods spent back in England. The narrative thereafter remains situated in Iceland.

Figure 6: Summer

At the centre of this weaving is the core: a story spanning two annual light-cycles (light-dark-light-dark-light) based in the Westfjords of Iceland. Two cycles (compared to, for example, Ritter's one) signals a commitment to this North as a life, rather than a prolonged adventure from which the narrator will soon return.

Figure 3. Forays – winter

Ritter and Tait share this secondary structure of a weaving motion; of the narrator's journeys of increasing distance outwards and back again from the central symbol of the hut/home. Tait's *Place of Work* takes us from her desk out of the front door and around the house in 'an east, south, west and north circling; showing the shape of the garden, and then to repeat this circle, with excursions in and out of the house, observing on the way with equal gaze the creatures in the garden, human activity outside the glimpses of town, sea and other islands beyond.'[48]

The majority of Ritter's forays are close to her hut and related to chores: 'Everything is covered in freshly fallen snow. I sink knee deep in it when I go out to collect some' (Ritter 2010, p. 102); or to staying sane: 'Obediently I take my "walk" every day. I buckle on my skis and take turns around the hut' (p.124). Some take her further afield, the distances covered limited to what is possible on foot, skis, or dog sleigh. Near or far, her forays supply a rich texture of imagery which builds up a sense of the place: 'I cast no shadow on the strangely glowing surface; my feet leave no tracks in the porcelain-hard snow' (p. 98).

In the modern globalised context of *The Raven's Nest*, which spans a period of six years between 2008 and 2014, the narrator's forays extend from the valley behind her house, across the region, across Iceland, overseas to her native England, and to her childhood home of Kenya. As for Ritter and for Tait (and for Shepherd in her Cairngorms-as-home) the 'home' is both a focal point and a lens through which the narrator examines her world, her identity and her humanity.

This recursive looping movement is thematic as well as spatial. Over the course of *The Raven's Nest* certain motifs are returned to several times, approached from different angles. For example, a seal is encountered as a living creature and possible Selkie in 'Seal Wife' (p. 54), as potential food in '*Mataræði* – Diet' (p. 39), and as the nexus of a filmed moment of skill and resilience in '*Selur* – Seal' (p. 113).

The Raven's Nest shares with Tait's film-making style a composition from fragments set in dialogue with one another. The narrative is episodic. Chapter lengths and weathers are characteristically varied, intended to reflect that which they describe in form and tone. However, each fragment (chapter) has a wholeness, affording the reader the possibility to

[48] National Library of Scotland Moving Image Archive, *Place of Work,* https://movingimage.nls.uk/film/6230 [accessed 18 February 2019]

dip into the memoir at any point. The meaning of one chapter evolves when positioned next to another. In *The Living Mountain* too, each standalone chapter takes us along different imaginative pathways, revealing something new about the mountain and about Shepherd each time, shifting our perception when placed next to another chapter. To name only a few, Shepherd's chapter titles move from 'The Plateau' through 'Air and Light' and 'Birds, Animals, Insects' until we are simply 'Being' and know her 'total mountain' (2011, p.105).

3. Sensuous, aesthetic and aural engagement

A revised, reciprocal relationship with the Other and with the North finds expression in the texts of Shepherd, Ritter and Griffiths in particular, as they engage in sensuous relationship with their world and are changed by it. The result is a democratisation of the sensorium: the whole body is treated as a source of knowledge. 'In the mountains,' writes Shepherd 'may be lived a life of the senses so pure...that the body may be said to think' (2011, p.105).

There are instances in *The Living Mountain* where Shepherd's bodily relationship with the Cairngorms is not only sensuous but sensual: 'When the aromatic savour of the pine goes searching into the deepest recesses of my lungs, I know it is life that is entering. I draw life in through the delicate hairs of my nostrils' (2011, p.52). She writes matter and weather as intimate protagonists: 'some [clouds] nuzzle [the wayfarer] gently but with such persistence he might as well walk through a loch' (p.17).

Griffiths, observing a whale hunt from the midst of it, likens it to sex: 'a sense of the universe being tightly drawn into this drama here; all senses heightened; a concentration of both mind and body, tight muscles, thoughts urgent and tense' (2008, p.120). She, too, animates her material world: 'Dark is a stalking, hungry season, preying on summer, stealthy and watchful. It doesn't have to pounce or chase, for it is a predator half made of time' (p.111). Here the coming of winter is rendered as an inevitable advance that will seize both body and psyche.

While Shepherd is scientifically alert to the natural processes going on around her, she does not quantify or measure, but experiences. Vision is not prioritised as the most reliable of the senses and perceiving is not reserved for the ability to see:

> That cloud, like others inside which I have walked, was wet but not wetting. It did not wet us till, almost at the summit, it broke in hard rain, and we could see at last the corries, scarfed in mist (2011, p.17).

Whether her world is visible or not, Shepherd gets inside of it. Looking into the bottom of a crystal-clear lake into which she has 'stripped and bathed', she writes, 'How clear it was only this walking into it could reveal. To look through it was to discover its own properties'. The consequence: 'I know its depth, though not in feet' (p.12). Using her whole body as a source of knowledge elicits a sensuous prose that was radical at the time of writing.

While some of her observations are described in language possessing a metaphysical ring, others are presented at a domestic scale. Describing the smell of spruce when sawn, she writes, 'In the hot sun it is almost like a ferment – like strawberry jam on the boil, but with a tang that tautens the membranes of nose and throat (2011, p.52). I suggest that both techniques make the 'hostile' mountains imaginatively and literally available to those readers who might not consider themselves mountaineers, while the text remains characterised by quiet awe.

The Raven's Nest's narrator is also faced with, and learns from, her experiential presence in the world. At the return of the light in 'The Frozen Bell', seeing her shadow for the first time in months she remarks:

> […] I watch, bemused at this companion who moves like I do; who now seems like a version of me that existed until today – not fully here, but stretched out and deep blue. Finally, it is peeling away, and I have come back into my body (p.95).

She is equally alert to how her world not only looks but feels. In 'The Strangest Silence', she remarks: 'Breakfasted, I go out to the front step and inhale the sea air. It is tight in my nostrils, freezing the moisture within them, and it parches the back of my throat' (p.162) and 'I smile but it hurts my teeth to keep them exposed for too long, so I lick them with my warm tongue and make a mental note to remember to smile inwardly' (p.162).

Also in 'The Strangest Silence' another's body – that of the narrator's partner – is a source of knowledge: 'I placed my hands gently on his skin. It was cold. A layer of fat made of a lifetime of eating fish, lamb, seal and whale, kept his warmth in' (p.159). Such knowledge not only implies the longevity and intimacy of relationship between them, but also the degree of her partner's entanglement with his world.

With the situatedness of dwelling, her sensory engagement with the soundscape of the house becomes ever more finely calibrated and thus a source of knowledge. In 'The Strangest Silence', a heightened sense of hearing is required for protection during a storm:

> Staying awake can do nothing to deter flying objects. But alert to changes in the wind's pitch, I can brace myself against the potential onslaught of a shattering bedroom window (p. 158).

In '*Krummi* – Raven' a sound reveals the narrator's responsibility to her other-than-human neighbours, in this case to feed the raven in winter:

> *Tap tap tap.*
>
> There is a tapping sound on the roof. It is one of various sounds the house makes. It is like a chatter of it getting to know me, as I make my acquaintance with it (p.79).

Discovering the source of the tapping the narrator observes:

> Ólafur laughs and curls his index finger. '*Tap tap tap*'.
>
> …The raven *krunks* and flies down from the roof. His wings squeak the air as he alights on the rock, where Ólafur has left a pile of bones…Bjarni translates: 'He says if you forget, Krummi will come and tap on the roof to remind you' (p.82).

Shepherd, too, acknowledges other-than-human voices, and listens: 'As I stand there in the silence, I become aware that the silence is not complete. Water is speaking' (p.22). Griffiths listens to 'the authoring wind' (2008, p.112) and experiences 'the small jubilation of a stream' (p.111). She is awake to the interrelationships and languages of Others of which she is not a nexus: 'A husky puppy was chewing the tail fluke of a beluga whale as a raven first barked like a dog and then poured out a streaming melody like a songbird' (p.123). So fully experiencing the world around us, Shepherd writes, 'Place and a mind interpenetrate till the nature of both is altered' (p.8). (Note the humility of 'a mind', emphasising her subjectivity, rather than 'mind', which would assume universal experience). Encountering the landscape through such de-centred narrators, the reader may go with them into an openness of spirit and reverence.

In *A Woman in the Polar Night* Ritter also deals with 'the strange illumination of one's own self in the remoteness of the polar night' (2010, p.12) Though Ritter's body is less

foregrounded in her prose than Shepherd's in *The Living Mountain*, it is both immersed in the place and annihilated by it:

> And as though I were unsubstantial, no longer there, the infinite space penetrates through me and swells out, the surging of the sea passes through my being, and what was once a personal will dissolves like a small cloud against the inflexible cliffs (2010, p. 99).

For much of the text, Ritter's sensory presence is expressed aesthetically. As befits a painter (p.100), vision is key in her sensorium and she renders images skilfully in text: 'Like a shell opalescing into its own shadowy hues, the earth is floating in transparent space […]' (p.96). She describes everyday scenes with startling simplicity and a powerful imagistic voice: 'There is the seal, lying on the black stones, already slit up and laid open like a book' (p. 45).

The film-maker narrator of *The Raven's Nest* also perceives as an artist. While Ritter renders what she sees as paintings (colours, lights, forms), the North of *The Raven's Nest* is rendered in filmic vignettes. These evoke soundscapes, landscapes and characters through detailed aesthetic and aural description, gesture and dialogue, and a variety of 'focal lengths' and 'camera positions'. In '*Hvalurinn* – The Whale' for example, a close-up portrait of a farmer is created, using sentence-length 'clips':

> The mist on Aðalstein's glasses evaporates as he withdraws his mug of coffee from his lips. He reaches over to the thermos of brewed coffee and places it in front of me, revealing a large hole in the armpit of his woollen jumper (p. 171).

In '*Selur* – Seal', filmic imagery is contextualised in a filmed moment:

> I press the record button. A dead raven is flopped over the fence, wedged between two uprights: it has been placed there. I zoom in on the bluish gloss on its wing feathers, the diffused reflection of overcast sky in its solid black beak. Flies begin to land around its eyes (p.119).

In 'The Strangest Silence' the narrator's aesthetic sensibility is brought to bear on the power of the Other – in this case the ocean – written on her partner's skin in a 'door frame-shaped bruise' acquired on his fishing boat during a storm: 'A horizon of deep purple seeped downwards into red, like the colours of the sun that doesn't rise but gestures, in midwinter' (p 159). The colour similes used hold the reader in the season from which the storm and the

bruise emerged. Similarly, Griffiths notes of colour, ‘Red, at its most northerly point, contends with no southerly shades – red wine or roses. Only blood (2008, p.113).

Griffiths writes of sight’s subservience to the ear for the Inuit of the Arctic (2008, p. 108). In the North, appearances can be deceiving, and could be fatal if relied upon. Similarly, film-making has a visual bias which I didn’t find to be ‘true’ to my North. In the prose of *The Raven’s Nest* I could also evoke soundscapes as integral to experience. Sound, interacting with the space of the North, plays with scale and the sense of what is real. In ‘The Strangest Silence’ I write:

> I hear them: rocks tumbling – the freeze-thaw-freeze-thaw coming to its inevitable conclusion. It is a cacophony while it lasts; a sound like the first moments of the world tearing apart, or a tree being felled. But I cannot see any rocks falling. How can something invisible be so loud? (p.163).

Sound, too, is a fundamental part of Ritter’s sensory world. Sometimes it gathers around the hut: ‘The wind was howling in the stovepipe, and on the roof frozen corpses of the skinned foxes, left up there for heaven knows what reason, were tapping and knocking’ (2010, p. 90). At other times, sound arrives as a disembodied companion: ‘The regular, too-loud creaking in the air scarcely penetrates my consciousness; I can hardly make the connection between the noise and the movement of my wooden skis; far more alien still is the high, clear cracking of the frost’ (2010, p.98).

4. Languages and orality

Through poetic devices, Griffiths’ prose not only describes but also *evokes* the sound of the place speaking: ‘[W]ater sucks through a cave of ice in a sonorous glug and the berg grinds its molars on the gravel shore’ (2008, p.105). She writes, ‘In one sense all languages lean towards the wild world through onomatopoeia’ (p.29). Onomatopoeia, working with prosody, cadence and alliteration like dogs in a sleigh team – as one but with differentiated task strengths – lend *Wild’s* prose an orality which I find appropriate for writing the North. Through sound and her arrangement of words, Griffiths collapses the boundaries between human, animal and matter; and distorts distances, as the place itself does:

> Gulls sob like creaking ice, and three snow buntings flying past mew in the cold air. It is hard to get a perspective on sound, here. Is that a distant ruffle of paw on snow, or the breeze in your hood? (2008, p.105).

Taking inspiration from Griffiths and from the Icelandic propensity for story *telling* in which one becomes practiced in narrating everyday events, *The Raven's Nest* has been written to be enjoyed read aloud should one chose to do so. It is a rendition of a bodily experience that can also be received bodily. For example, this excerpt from 'The Strangest Silence' (a silence which, it emerges, has a lot of sound in it) uses alliteration, onomatopoeia, and rhythm to make the ocean animate:

> Last night the weather was wild. The sea wall below the house boomed as the breakers heaved their guts over their girth. Lying in bed, I could feel the impact like a distant explosion, over and over and over (p.158).

There are instances in which Griffiths, as I do, plays with grammar itself, to make language come alive. She writes, 'It is autumn now, the twilight of thaw. Summer's vowels are swallowed by the first howl of autumn, before winter, consonantal, cracking, shocks the last whisper out of the land (2008, p.111). In *The Raven's Nest,* the chapter 'Engagement' describes a journey through the landscape, during which the narrator first notes the implication of an Icelandic suffix:

> I recall the name Rjúkandi, another waterfall near Bjarni's parents' summer house. I remember it means 'smoking' because of the vapour it sends up, visible from far away. I make the connection that the ending *-andi* makes the word a verb; a process. The waterfalls I have met in other parts of Iceland have always been called something -*foss*: *foss* meaning waterfall […] I wonder if it is a characteristic particular to the Westfjordians that their waterfalls are verbs, named for the witnessed outcome of their natures, rather than for their place in topography or history (pp.106-107).

Later in the journey, inspired by the narrator's observation, the landscape is animated; a mountain transformed into a thing in process, and a noun into a verb: 'Snæfell to the south is cone shaped; liquid and solid at once, ridged and rivuleted with snow' (p.110). The changes in the way the narrator thinks are thus integrated into the language used to describe her world thereafter.

A foreign language (Icelandic) forming part of the soundscape I write distinguishes my experience and my prose vis à vis this ancestry of women. Tait and Shepherd lived, walked and made work in their mother tongue. Ritter was mostly alone. In *Wild* Griffiths includes Inuktituk words she has researched to demonstrate Inuit concepts but she does not learn it (for example p.129, p.139). Icelandic was a part of my soundscape which I needed to

understand in order to dwell there. It became a mode of thought and my unfolding understanding of it informs the prose of *The Raven's Nest*.

I attempt to build the Icelandic language, with its pace and silence, into the tone and rhythm of my prose. My chapter titles reflect the learning process as the narrative progresses. Some titles are only in English while others are in English and Icelandic. An Icelandic word is included where it acts as a metaphor for the whole chapter. For example, '*Mataræði* – Diet (*matur* – 'food', *æði* –_'craziness')' is about the narrator's introduction to traditional Icelandic fare and the conflicting attitudes of the narrator and her father-in-law as to the edibility of a seal. In light of the chapter's contents the Icelandic word might compel the reader to think differently about its English equivalent(s), as I did.

Feminine writing. Entangled Woman, writing

I suggest that with these women, our work performs a subtle kind of environmentalism. Through a blend of close and sustained observation, listening, and feeling, with emotive storytelling, our writing connects the reader to the place, the planet and to different kinds of time. The 'I' of *The Raven's Nest* is intended not only to be an entangled narrator, but also the possible reader. It is about an experience which happened to be mine but could be somebody else's. I invite the reader to experience through my eyes, and my body. By doing so I enjoin them into the relationality that I experienced in this North in the hope it may be transposed to their lifeworlds.

All of these works tacitly suggest that by *knowing* a place – making 'home' there – and understanding our impact on it, we may care about it, and will have a wish to protect it. However, such knowledge is never assumed to be complete. Rather than attempting to document a place, such work ultimately embraces its unknowability: 'I knew when I had looked for a long time,' writes Shepherd, 'that I had hardly begun to see' (2011, p. 11). What might such a genre of work be called in which a de-centred narrator is engaged in a sensuous tangle of knowledges, relationships and consequences in her story of ongoingness?

To some degree it is a feminine writing. My 'ancestry' and I challenge the prevailing perceptions of North, and of writing and film-making, as a masculine space. There are longstanding reasons their work remains under-recognised. In her ground-breaking feminist text, *Laugh of the Medusa* (1979), writer and philosopher Hélène Cixous laments that:

‘Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason.’[49] She calls for an *Écriture Feminine* (‘feminine writing’), which breaks free from this ‘phallocentric tradition’ (1976, p.879). Cixous’ recommends that such writing defies borders of any kind, being patterned not according to the demands of the page but according to the human mind and body working in relation to the world, bringing forth ‘its specific energy’ and ‘its very different sounds’ (p. 887).

She insists that woman must make herself visible in the text and in the world. *The Laugh of the Medusa* opens:

> Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement (p. 875).

In so doing, she concludes that ‘A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there’s no other way’ (p.888).

My ancestors’ work and my own encompasses elements of *Écriture Feminine*. As Cixous recommends, they relate a woman’s perspective of a woman’s experience. They include repeated forms of embodiment. Mind, body and place interrelate. Journeys are made between interior and exterior worlds. *The Raven’s Nest* in particular comprises a characteristic sense of rupture. In addition, the experiences on which my memoir is based were not shaped by literary agendas: at the time, I was a film-maker who relinquished her camera to engage with the changes happening to her. Writing this memoir as a PhD has also freed me to be more experimental than I might have been working within the parameters of a still patriarchal publishing industry.[50]

In Cixous’ thesis, however, the call to make oneself present in the text happens within the sphere of the woman-human in resistance to the man-human (the patriarchy). The Anthropocene calls for a different kind of upheaval that is only just beginning in literature:

---

[49] Hélène Cixous, ‘Laugh of The Medusa’, trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs,* 1, 4 (1976), (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 875-893 (p. 879).

[50] See for example John Boyne, ‘Women are better writers than men: Novelist John Boyne sets the record straight’, *Guardian* online, 12 December 2017 https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/dec/12/double-x-factor-why-women-are-better-writers-than-men [accessed 10 Jan 2019]

one in which humans assume their right place, which is not at the centre.[51] My writing intends to be more democratic with Others than is called for by *Écriture Feminine*.

The narrator of *The Raven's Nest* is positioned, and visible, not only as woman-human, but as an entangled 'I'. The memoir addresses the experience of her body in physical entanglement with, or in symbolic relationship with, the Anthropocenic body of the earth, and being resisted by it. With volcanic eruptions, climate change, pollutant cascade effects and the sixth mass extinction ongoing, the rupturing is now literal and affects us all. So positioned, the 'I' is conspicuously *less* present, *less* visible as a protagonist enacting a plot, than a reader may expect of a memoir. This lack of visibility is no consequence of phallocentrism as my forebears have had to contend with, but of an anti-anthropocentrism, or a move towards ecocentrism.

The tropes of my memoir and the texts comprising its specific lineage, in fact share much common ground with the speculative set of proposals for 'rewilding' the novel in Abi Andrews' essay, 'A Novel is a Medicine Bundle: Writing from Down in the Dirt', which I find to be equally applicable to creative non-fiction.[52] Rewilding is an ecological term used to describe a process of leaving an area of land to re-establish its ecosystem without human intervention or disruption. In his seminal work on the topic, *Feral*, author George Monbiot writes, 'Rewilding recognizes that nature consists not just of a collection of species but also of their ever-shifting relationships with each other and with the physical environment.'[53]

Andrews' literary rewilding implies textually entering into relationships with other species than humans, other matters, and other times than the present, in the act of writing worlds. Like my own work, her essay draws upon Ursula Le Guin's Carrier Bag Theory and Donna Haraway's tentacular thinking and 'sympoeisis' in the Chthulucene (Haraway 2016, p. 33). Andrews proposes that 'the human' – woman or otherwise – is also what is not-human:

> There is a shard of yourself to be found in every exceptional creature; the image of what you are not reminding you of what you are. The stories we tell about ourselves must reflect this newer understanding of the human condition, to reflect non-human personhood.

---

[51] The shortlisting of Richard Powers' *The Overstory* for the 2018 Man Booker Prize marks a shift towards an ecocentric literature entering the mainstream.
[52] https://dark-mountain.net/a-novel-is-a-medicine-bundle/ [accessed. 2 November 2018]
[53] George Monbiot, *Feral* (Allen Lane: London, 2013), pp. 8-9.

As we story away from binaries and human exceptionalism, the marginal position Cixous sees occupied by woman Andrews extends to a more diverse cast, which she recommends be brought centre stage as a moral gesture towards collaborative survival:

> The new stories must call upon all of the stage props and passive chorus actors from the phallic story, must animate the 'other'; that's women and marginalised individuals, but also the rocks the trees and the moss and the lichen, called to leading roles. That's no longer giving precedence to stories that are singularly male, white and western; of which there are enough. No more *godtricks*, no omniscience, loud voice from the clouds, speaking of everything from nowhere. Instead making way for the howling, grunting, squawking, wordless chorus, asserting our own true place in things, down in the mud.

Andrews believes, as I do, that such 'more-than-one' stories are an authentic way to acknowledge a shared vulnerability with Others who live in this world, from which strength might be gained, rather than despair:

> We need to claim ground back from the *shifted baseline*, and the way to tackle too-big stories…when the too-big stories lend themselves to cynicism, defeatism, and cognitive dissonance, is to try instead with multiplicitous stories that are *big-enough*.

Such embracing of our ongoing *not knowing*, a humility in the face of Others and the possibility for multiple truths to coexist, affords an adaptability to these narratives towards an uncertain future. Andrews continues:

> The rewilded novel could be a space for the sharing-with and the being-changed-by, rather than colonial, imperial approaches to knowing the other. The aim should not be the impossible inhabitation of nonhuman worlds, but to assert our place in the web of things, and share what it looks like from there, what it feels like to receive the gaze of the nonhuman other, and to witness without understanding, a nonhuman logic. To express the feeling of *embodiment* that comes with being witnessed by another.

Perhaps then, it is rewilded memoir. Or to borrow from Ursula Le Guin again, a rewilded 'life story' (Le Guin 1989, p.168). This life story has death in it, but nothing is overcome.

What is the North from here? Christiane Ritter strives for it:

> No, the Arctic does not yield its secret for the price of a ship's ticket. You must live through the long night, the storms and the destruction of human pride. You must have gazed on the deadness of all things to grasp their livingness (2010, p. 214)

Nan Shepherd witnesses it upside down, from between her legs:

> How new it has become! From the close-by sprigs of heather to the most distant fold of the land, each detail stands erect in its own validity […] Details are no longer part of a grouping in a picture of which I am the focal point, the focal point is everywhere. Nothing has reference to me, the looker. This is how the earth must see itself (2011, p.11).

Jay Griffiths studies it: 'From Inuit people in the Arctic I learned something of the intricate ice and that all landscape is knowledgescape. From whales and dolphins I learned how much we do not know, the octaves of possibilities, the maybes of the mind.' (2008, p.4)

Margaret Tait knows it in her bones. Her poem, *The Scale of Things*, opens:

> There's a whole country at the foot of the stone
> If you care to look.
> These are the stones we have instead of trees
> In the north.
> Our trees all got lost,
> Blown over or cut down
> Long long ago, and some of them lie there still in the
> peat moss
> Or fossilized in limestone.

I feel it with my whole body lying on the earth. I view it curved, refracted, inverted through a lens of nature's making. It requires a depth of attention, a stillness, to hear the languages of Others and to let them speak for themselves:

> There was a phrase in the evening in which the sea and the air stilled; completely stilled. Every single blade of grass was in the sharpest focus, each one with its own height, shape, shadow and character. At a barely perceptible moment, jewels of dew the colour of clarity formed on these blades, suddenly, like an implicit agreement coming to fruition. A golden world of sea and islands, pebbles and seaweed, dandelions and lambs, tractors and brightly coloured houses, was instantly contained within each crystal globe, curved into a new reality. (pp.113-114)

(From '*Selur* – Seal' in *The Raven's Nest*)

The Ethics of Entanglement

The nature of entanglement is that one has responsibilities to Others, as to oneself. This chapter discusses the ethical dimensions of the creation and publication of *The Raven's Nest.* Particular considerations emerge when writing a memoir set in Iceland, which includes a divorce, in the context of a PhD. These can be broken down into three main areas of concern. Broadly, there are the potential implications of memoir as a form for author, narrator and protagonist(s). Closely associated are the specific circumstances of the experience I draw upon in my memoir – that is, writing about subjective experience involving living people with whom I am entangled, and about ecologically fragile places in the Anthropocene. Finally, requiring consideration are the institutional parameters of writing a memoir describing other living people, within the academy. Implicated with these areas of concern are three different positionalities I assume within this project: narrator, author and PhD candidate.

During my research a multitude of questions have arisen: What is memoir? How are memories constituted? What is 'truth' or 'authenticity' in this context? How has this 'truth' been arrived at? What is 'the self' in this circumstance? Who is 'the author'? What do I make myself vulnerable to by writing this memoir? Who is 'the narrator'. Who or what stands to be affected by the position I choose to assume, and how? Who were 'the characters/ protagonists'? Did they know they would be written about? What kinds of relationship had emerged between the writer and the characters and between characters? When did these relationships take place? How have these relationships changed since the events that are being written about and what implications might these changes have? What effect did language have on the mediation of experience? And a point which perhaps most fundamentally precedes and informs all of these questions is: what was I seeking that took me to have this experience in the first place?

What was I seeking?

In 2008 – the beginning of the time frame in which *The Raven's Nest* is set – I lived in London. I was seeking a simpler and more resilient existence than my current life allowed: one in which I could *dwell,* not just work and consume (Ingold 2000, p. 153); an existence

which was led by the seasons and where I had to notice their characteristics and their disruption. On my first encounter with Iceland in May of that year, I was struck by its apparent simplicity. The human population of about 315,000, living on an island slightly smaller than England, was vastly outnumbered by non-human Others.[54] The 'stories' of my actions intersecting with those of other people, species and matters were refreshingly apparent. There was a dearth of man-made layers obscuring my impact on place and its impact on me. This simplicity made my human presence on the earth easier to think about.

Globally, climate change and ecological collapse was well underway but not yet the headline news it has become by 2019.[55] The headlines were grabbed a few months later by the unfolding global financial crisis in which Iceland was a key player. Iceland's irresponsible international banking bankrupted the nation and affected many British local councils with ISA investments there, bringing it to the world's attention. My London job was coming to an end and any perceived stability was disintegrating.

Eighteen months after the financial crisis began, the eruption of the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull in 2010 caused the largest shutdown of European airspace since World War 2 leaving many travellers stranded for days.[56] This eruption hindered then helped Iceland's already damaged reputation. At first some considered Iceland the source of an unwelcome challenge to a human-centric *modus operandi* in which unlimited global travel is a given. Others saw it as home to one of nature's great spectacles. The eruption, coupled with a greatly devalued *krona* following the financial collapse, fuelled a tourism boom which has still not abated in 2019.

In the meantime, I had fallen in love with an Icelandic man who lived in this place that seemed so 'simple'. He was part of a network of family and community that to my eyes looked like the definition of resilience. Iceland: a place that seemed so simple, yet was collapsing, and constantly being remade. I had the opportunity to live in this place and hoped it might teach me resilience. I went to Iceland to live the question: what is it to dwell in the Anthropocene, in the midst of 'collapse', and in another's culture? The resulting memoir

---

[54] https://www.statista.com/statistics/594539/total-population-of-iceland/ [accessed 11 Feb 2019]
[55] See for example Damian Carrington, 'Humans just 0.01% of all life but have destroyed 83% of wild mammals – study', *Guardian* online, 21 May 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/may/21/human-race-just-001-of-all-life-but-has-destroyed-over-80-of-wild-mammals-study [accessed 11 February 2019]
[56] https://www.tcd.ie/Economics/assets/pdf/SER/2014/elin_thora.pdf [accessed Feb 29, 2018]

involves a number of people and places with whom relationships (some delicate) must be negotiated.

What is memoir?

Memoir is a kind of autobiographical writing which draws on aspects of the author's life to tell a particular story. Distinct from autobiography, which is often a chronological rendition of a whole life and a record of accomplishment, memoir selects parts of the author's experience as a lens onto the world, and the structure need not be chronological. As Zinsser (1987) puts it, 'memoir assumes the life and ignores most of it'.[57] The narrator of a memoir, therefore, is telling a certain story from a certain perspective, drawing on memory, emotion, experience, and imagination. As a type of creative non-fiction, memoir is a craft and a construction which may borrow tropes from fiction, such as plot, characters and dialogue.

Referring to Barry Lopez's new memoir *Horizon,* author Robert Macfarlane laments the current imitations of literary labels for '[…] what we still weirdly call "non-fiction" (thereby defining it only in negative and restricting relation to fiction)'[58] Despite being a creative construction, memoir nonetheless has an allegiance to accuracy and truth. Author Annie Dillard argues that as a creative construction, the most successful memoirs forge their own form and 'direct the reader's attention in equal parts to the text-as-formal object – and to the world, as an interesting place in which we find ourselves' (Dillard in Zinsser 1987, p. 67). I suggest my position as film-maker and implicated resident has been a strength in this regard: an absence of a literary point of view or agenda can give rise to original literature.

Though memoir is based in the author's experience, Maftei (2013) reminds us that, '[...]no person's life can be neatly separated from the lives of others; therefore, neither can their stories.'[59] Conventionally a memoir follows a narrative arc which focuses on events happening to a narrator. And much like a novel, the setting and the other characters are backdrop or secondary to his/her actions. My experiment delves into Maftei's observation

[57] William Zinsser (1987) 'Writing and Remembering: a memoir and an introduction', *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir,* ed. by William Zinsser (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company), pp. 11-29 (p.21).
[58] Robert Macfarlane (2019) 'Horizon by Barry Lopez review – magnificent on the natural world, and furious too', *Guardian* online, 14 March 2019**,** https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/mar/14/horizon-by-barry-lopez-review [accessed 14 March 2019]
[59] Micaela Maftei, *The Fiction of Autobiography: Reading and Writing Identity* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 3

further than a conventional memoir might – the lack of separation from the lives of others, including non-human Others, becoming a primary trope; the story told by an entangled narrator.

What is 'the self' in this circumstance?

I experienced a diversity of identities during the period this memoir describes. Some were relinquished (academic, independent woman, outsider) while some were assumed (*Útlendingar* ('Outlander'), immigrant, 'flower woman', tourist guide, partner, wife, daughter-in-law, extended family member, insider). My journey from outsider to insider afforded a greater depth and diversity of knowledge about place and culture than might have been available as an academic researcher or visiting film-maker, gathering material then retreating to a familiar quotidian. Nonetheless, it also gave rise to an unfixed sense of 'self'.

A further complication to the idea of 'self' arose in the mediation of my 'personal' experience. Family are the main social unit in Iceland, and my 'in-laws', Gyða and Haukur, lived nearby. As such, we were closely involved in each other's lives. I saw them several times a week and we ate together often. My partner Bjarni, a fisherman, was often at sea and his parents stood in as an extension of him as providers of help and resources. They were practically involved in the renovation of our house. I wore the jumpers and socks Gyða knitted for me. I ate the lamb from an aunt's flock and the fish that Bjarni had caught. Barely any 'thing' or event I participated in existed outside of a relationship with someone in the family – a manifestation of the resilience, and the entanglements, in which I was so interested.'

The need to learn Icelandic in order to better relate with place and with Bjarni's family was immediately apparent on arrival. As they were the people with whom I had most contact, I learned Icelandic largely through them. I learned the vocabulary for the kinds of things *they* talked about and was party mostly to *their* conversations. Thus, my lived experience was largely mediated by family members and their relationships (with me and each other).

This entangled and multiple identity-assuming 'I' is further complicated by the geographical isolation of the context. I lived in a steep sided valley whose mountains blocked the sun's light for many months a year. Snow lay on the ground for three times as long as it did not. My house faced the sea, as does every Icelandic settlement. Winds would make the house

creak. Light and the landscape were extremely present and influential in my lived experience. I was a woman attempting to dwell in an unfamiliar landscape, and often alone, while Bjarni was at sea. The solitude and lack of distraction, though often challenging, gave me the opportunity to reflect on my relationship with the immediacy of this landscape, and to observe its minutiae in every hour of changing lights and weathers.

The question of who 'I'– a human, and a woman – was in this context of an Arctic landscape became more interesting and ripe for reflection and expression. I wondered what might an individual 'I' be and what might her own story look like? Is it possible or desirable to achieve? I concluded that 'the self' in this context is not – cannot be – an 'individual'. Key to this memoir also is the presence of 'place' not as backdrop to human agency but as an agent itself interacting with the narrator and the other human characters. The marriage of these experiences underpins my entangled narrator.

Who is the narrator and who is the author?

In memoir, the narrator and the author are distinct though they will share characteristics, and a name. The narrator is a character created by the author, whose voice is most suitable to relate the story in hand. The narrator is therefore the self 'in whom *this story* reside[s]' (Gornick 2001, p.6). Over the course of *The Raven's Nest*, the narrator experiences a continuum of shifts in identity and understanding afforded by a new life in an unfamiliar place and learning a new language, which includes an understanding that she is not an independent entity. At the same time, the narrator is deeply affected by the weather, the light and her surroundings. As such this narrator comprises a panoply of 'selves', sometimes unreconciled, and this is intentionally rendered in a voice of many weathers. She tells her story from an entangled perspective, with a first person who is never only herself, but herself in relation to the world.

The narrator is Sarah, a British ethnographic film-maker who begins a relationship with an Icelander, curious, and observant: 'I have been fascinated by the words I have heard exchanged between everyone tonight – their sentences a melody of a flavour I have not heard before' (*Fjallafang* – Embrace of the Mountain, p. 38). She moves to Iceland to be with him and navigates a need to understand the place and culture, with a love of the ineffable: 'Each moment like this opens me still further to the truths in these stories' ('Seal Wife', p.58). Dwelling, and her involvement with the annual sheep farming cycle, triggers her adoption

of her Icelandic family's phlegmatic approach towards the life-death cycle: 'By the fifth carcass I scrub I am no longer upset when I hear the gunshot at the back door' ('*Smala og Slátur* - The Gathering and the Slaughter', p.64). In '*Þakkið* – Roof' (p.123) the narrator's apparent coldness towards her mother concerning the cremation of her deceased grandmother, when viewed in the context of the whole narrative, demonstrates this phlegmatic approach becoming her new normal. Meanwhile she shoots footage for a documentary about resilience, which the place seems to resist (see '*Hvalurinn* – The Whale' p.169).

A significant shift in voice occurs when the narrator's partner becomes a fisherman, and she is left alone to wonder who she is in relationship to this place. Through a depth of attention and acquisition of a new language, she comes to perceive her entanglement in a web of relationships with humans and Others. The series of closely observational, boundary-dissolving and interlinking chapters 'The Frozen Bell', '*Trúlofuð* – Engagement', '*Selur* – Seal', '*Þakkið* – Roof', *Göng* – Passage, corridor, tunnel' and 'A Walk in My Valley' (pp.86-137) (all of which nonetheless include her partner as a character) show the narrator's unfolding embeddedness in a family of things which includes the other-than-human. Her transition from outsider to insider culminates in '*Snúið* - The Turn' as she reacts to tourists effectively commodifying her partner. Other-than-human presences become foregrounded in her existence: 'I hear a sound from the raven, like a pebble being thrown down a well' ('The Strangest Silence', p.162). Light is a fundamental companion. Upon its return through her window after five-month absence her voice is poetic; boundaries are dissolved: 'The pine panelled walls are honey, the cane chair is freshly cut straw' ('The Frozen Bell', p.87)

While the narrator's voice has many weathers and weaves together threads of ideas, the 'camera positions' from which the story is told are diverse and dynamic and borrow from film-making: establishing shots, mid-shots, close-ups, diagetic sound, dialogue, present action and flashbacks are all put to work structuring my memories. A clear example of this is the chapter 'Breaking Up' (p.11).

The author, meanwhile, has ideas and vison that she wishes to explore through the narrator's voice. In my case she also has a level of self-awareness that the narrator could not have. While the narrator of *The Raven's Nest* undergoes shifts in understanding, so too does the author's understanding continue to change, with the insight afforded by time, distance and reflection. As the author, I am a slightly older woman than the narrator who has lived questions of dwelling and belonging in the context of the Icelandic Westfjords. I have

married and divorced, and moved away from Iceland, but remain irrevocably entangled with people and place. The awareness that such entanglement brings is transposed now onto wherever I find myself and has become the main driver of all my writing.

The narrator's voice should be authentic to what she knew at that time, whilst the author's reflexivity can be woven into it, if done skilfully, without compromising its authenticity. The time that has passed since I lived in Iceland has allowed me to reflect on who is speaking, from which it becomes clear why they are speaking. By choosing to write a memoir it has not been the case that my 'self' has become an explicit object of enquiry. More accurately, I am 'interested in my own existence only as a means of penetrating the situation in hand' (Gornick 2001, p. 25).

Who are 'the characters'?

My ex-husband ('Bjarni'), his parents ('Gyða and Haukur') and his aunt and uncle ('Salvar and Natalía') constituted a large part of my lifeworld and therefore are present in my memoir as 'characters'. Bjarni is the most significant, as the character who plays into and reflects my story. Other human 'characters', less central to the memoir, are neighbours, friends, and work colleagues in Iceland. My parents also feature as minor characters on a few occasions: once when the narrative shifts to Kenya (their home), and twice on their visits to Iceland. These 'minor' characters serve as devices for a chapter's theme, rather than being integral to a plot. For example, in '*Krummi*' (p. 79), a neighbour ('Ólafur') is a vehicle for knowledge about the narrator's responsibility to feed a raven. As devices, these characters are not easily identifiable. Ethical considerations regarding privacy, which I shall discuss below, are most pertinent to the Icelandic family members who may be identifiable.

Ethics of Entangled Memoir

What is 'truth' or 'authenticity' in this context?

Maftei (2013) asks what is 'the truth' in autobiographical writing?[60] Can it only include externally verifiable material? Should we refuse to include speech that had not been recorded? Do we refuse to write about anyone other than the self? All of these criteria are impossible and undesirable for me and I would suggest for most memoirists. Fulfilling these criteria you may arrive at a truth less truthful to life than a more creative approach is able to deliver. It would imply that you had been living the situation through a rather contrived autobiographical lens, the output always in mind.

The Anthropocenic context of my personal and academic circumstances has implications for me as a writer. It is an epoch in which conditions are constantly in flux, making it both impossible and futile for me to assume a fixed position, whether as narrator, author or PhD candidate. Like my 'ancestry' in 'Writing the Nature of North', such writing must embrace 'unknowability' whilst contributing to knowledge. Maftei insists that we should work with a multiplicity of responses and perspectives to arrive at our own. For her, 'Personal histories are multiple […] an account with depth, validity and accuracy will necessarily include multiplicity, in terms of tellers, in terms of viewpoints, in terms of response' (Maftei 2013, p.40). Maftei's criteria could be deemed to call for consultation with my 'characters' to hear their versions of the 'truth' so that I may choose to consider them in my own. In my case, time and circumstance have changed relationships, such that consultation was not always possible or desirable. Maftei also acknowledges the reader's part in the construction of truth, adding: 'This multiplicity need not take away from the truthfulness of the writing; it should be understood that readers can and will bring their own interpretations and views to a text, helping shape their response to it' (2013, p.40).

Following Zinsser, I have considered my work to sift through the 'jumble' of memories to construct a narrative which will lead the memoirist to 'arrive at a truth that is theirs alone, not quite like that of anybody else who was present at the same events' (Zinsser in Maftei 2013, p.18). The memories that have inspired *The Raven's Nest* were triggered by a diversity

---

[60] Micaela Maftei, *The Fiction of Autobiography: Reading and Writing Identity* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 2.

of 'media': first-hand experience; 'second-hand' tellings (my own and others') of events in which I participated, stories I was told by my Icelandic family about events pertaining to them which occurred before I met them; contemporary blog posts; a digital cascade of still images and video taken as I experienced it all; and text messages, letters and journal entries, parts of which are incorporated into the text verbatim. This diversity reflects both the centrality of 'storytelling' in Icelandic daily life and the forms of memory-making available to me as an author in the 21st century.

How is this truth arrived at?

In *The Situation and the Story* (2001) Gornick differentiates between 'situation' and 'story' as two versions of the same events.[61] In these terms, my lived experience was my 'situation' and through my PhD research I have identified a persona – the narrator – through which it could become my 'story'. My memoir's 'story' is a quarrying *of* truth rather than an experiment *with* truth. As a memoir of the Anthropocene, accuracy is particularly important to me to achieve a trustworthy narrator who might offer inspiration in times where imaginative shifts are required.

Accepting that it is impossible to take a fixed position in these rapidly changing times, I have instead made attempts to synthesise a diversity of knowledges in my quest for accuracy. In my case the 'material' drawn upon has involved a longitudinal, sensuous engagement with place and with others who are of that place, speaking their language (Icelandic) with them. The documentation and memory-making of this engagement was made in a variety of media, as described above. At the writing stage, I attempted a synthesis of artistic and scientific knowledges. For example, I incorporated research conducted by The Marine and Freshwater Institute, Reykjavík into the herring mass deaths of 2012 and 2013 in Kolgrafafjörður into my chapter 'Herring Adventure'. I was able to practice this type of synthesis through my participation in an initiative called *Weatherfronts: climate change and the stories we tell* (2016), which brought together scientists, writers and poets to foster collaborative research and experimentation in writing climate change and ecological collapse. [62] I was one of five participants awarded a commission to create a piece of new writing to contribute to their aims. I produced an 8,000-word essay entitled *Rainfall, Fell.* It used the memoir form to

[61] Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2001), p.18.
[62] Weatherfronts is a biannual partnership between TippingPoint, Free Word and Durham University Department of Geography.

relate my experience of the Cumbria floods of 2015 by describing an annual cycle of the hill where I live, including how the human and other-than-human 'characters' were changed by the flooding and the conflicting attitudes to land and flood management which exist there. It was a multi-layered piece based on many walks, conversations with neighbours, interviews with meteorologists and local historians, newspaper articles, weather data, letters from flood resilience agencies, and observations of the changing natural world.

As Zinsser points out, however, 'fidelity to the facts is no free pass to the reader's attention' (1987, p.25). We can consider memoir as a new creative construction informed and influenced by past events but not bound by them. In its quest for truthfulness, *The Raven's Nest* comprises a multiplicity of viewpoints, recurring themes and motifs approached from different angles, and told by a narrator who is changed by the place and her experience.

Mitigation

Two kinds of ethics are at play when writing a memoir as a PhD. The first is the moral human ethics that are brought to bear when writing about real people with whom one had, or has, ongoing relationships. This Anthropocenic memoir also brings to bear the moral ethics pertaining to the places and other-than-humans with whom I remain entangled. The second is the institutional ethics when writing such a memoir within the College of Social Sciences of a University. Regarding others, research in the Social Sciences conventionally requires the candidate to seek ethics approval for their research model and the treatment of data.

The move to Iceland detailed in my memoir was not motivated by academic concerns, however. I went to Iceland out of personal curiosity and fell in love – first with the landscape, then with an Icelandic man. Nor was it my intention to write a memoir at the time I lived the experience drawn upon in *The Raven's Nest*. In short, at no point in Iceland between 2008 and 2014 was I gathering data for social science research or for a memoir. As a practice-based PhD in creative writing, the research of this thesis focusses rather on working with the *memories* (which are my own) of a prolonged and entangled encounter with a culture and landscape that is not my own, and upon which I depended.

In writing about myself and others who formed an integral part of my experience I have needed to exercise caution. Adaptability and resilience to a number of possible circumstances has been key. These include misinterpretation of me as an author due to the

narrator's voice; a negative response of the 'characters' to my representation of them causing damage to relationships and a resulting difficulty of my return to the location; the characters' potential recognisability bringing unwanted attention; and the featuring of recognisable and reachable fragile places bringing an associated increase in visitor numbers and potential environmental damage.

Ultimately, I aim to have *The Raven's Nest* published. The implications of this as a final aim benefits from consideration at an early stage. Concerns regarding protection of people and places would become more pertinent with its publication as a memoir by a publishing house than as a thesis. As a memoir, *The Raven's Nest* could have a significant readership given current trends in 'place writing' and given the ongoing popularity of Iceland in 2019 as a destination. As PhD theses are made available online, changes, omissions or obfuscations made to the manuscript to protect privacy should then be consistent across publications to avoid traceability.

At the time events included in the memoir unfolded (2008-2014), it was not my intention to write a memoir. The people who are now 'characters' could not be aware that my memories, which include their actions and my feelings towards them, may end up on the page. The same people *were* comfortable with my attempts to make a documentary in which they featured – a medium which would make them more identifiable, and potentially vulnerable. But when shooting, they were aware when the camera was on and could behave/speak accordingly. A writer's 'camera', on the other hand, is always on. The characters' memories of events may differ from my own. And not being writers themselves, they do not have the opportunity to 'speak back' if they disagree with my story. Their right to privacy is to be respected. Considering this scenario, I have concluded it is that – *my* story – and taken measures to protect people and places from intrusion of privacy. An opportunity to 'speak back' would presuppose that there is a correct version of events; a 'truth'.

Memoirs involve more decisions around what to omit than what to include. Everything included must be doing something and must be acknowledged to assume symbolic heft on the page which it might not when diluted with all the facts and events in the author's mind. Taking this into account, along with the considerations that truth is subjective, that there are many possible versions of a story, that characters and author have a right to privacy, that relationships are changing things, and that in the Anthropocene nothing is stable, what steps have I taken to mitigate potential harm through invasion of privacy/ property?

Protecting myself

There were several benefits of writing this memoir as a PhD: there was an obligation to critically examine my creative writing. I had time for written pieces to mature and thus time ethically to consider changes in the relationships with the people about whom I have written. The academy has provided mentorship from two supervisors and a peer network who agreed to read drafts, and this multiplicity of feedback resulted in a robust authorial decision-making process. All of these factors allowed a depth of reflection on the writing I have produced, and has ensured that at present, the narrator's voice is representative of the story I want to tell.

Over the course of the PhD I have discussed my 'undisguised being' (Gornick 2001, p.7) with my supervisors, much of which is deeply personal and sensitive. They know information that will never make the page. We ensured that personal boundaries were not being crossed in communication, and that confidentiality was assured whilst I teased a public facing persona from the raw material of my memories, and continues into the future. Zinsser warns that by the time a writer has finished a memoir, 'you have cannibalized your remembered truth and replaced it with a new one' (1987, p. 27). The persona of the narrator needed to be robust enough to withstand me diving into the raw material of my memories and prepared for the changes in form they made.

As a crafter of truth, the author of a memoir is not obliged to share all, and they are at liberty to shape the story to expose the parts of themselves that serve it. My writing underwent considerable transformation in this respect over the duration of the PhD. In earlier pieces there was evidence of the writing acting as catharsis for personal difficulty. Guidance was given when my supervisor could see that I was losing sight of the narrator's persona or relating information that I may regret. Later work achieved an appropriate distance to convince the reader of a trustworthy narrator, and to convince me that I am not baring too much, or unnecessary information.

Through use of an 'entangled narrator' the focus shifts from me to the world through my (or the narrator's) eyes. The specific reasons for and nature of the breakdown of my marriage, for example, were not appropriate for detailed analysis in the memoir if they did not serve the story, which they do not. This theme in particular ran the risk of making myself, my ex-husband and his family unnecessarily vulnerable on the page, and it is a process towards which our attitudes will continue to change over time. The necessary elements could be

alluded to, without being placed under the spotlight. With its leaning towards ecocentrism, my creative construction obfuscates my, and connected others', very personal details to focus more on situating my story within many stories of generation, decay and renewal. This is unconventional in memoir, which usually comprises candid revelation of the narrator's inner life. It is an innovative element in my work which also serves to protect those described in it.

There is a tension between the positionalities of author and narrator 'existing' in two timeframes simultaneously. As the author I am writing about myself in a former time. Should *The Raven's Nest* be published my outlook will have changed again by the time I might have to speak about the memoir. A memoir risks fixing the author in a certain time, with certain perspectives. To make clear that the memoir is set in a very specific time frame, I have timestamped each chapter. To resist fixity, and to reflect the intangible qualities of the North, I have attempted to build ambiguity and paradox into the prose. This is achieved through the de-centred narrator, and frequent use of symbolism and metaphor inviting the reader's own resonances. The chapters are often led by material objects which become symbolic, the heft of which is informed by insight or my current status. If I was still happily married, for example, I would not necessarily attribute the same symbolism to certain events or draw parallels with certain objects. For example, in '*Svartfuglsegg* – black-birds-egg' (p.164) the discovered toxicity of guillemot eggs is made symbolic of the narrator's marriage by one first appearing as decoration on her wedding cake.

Despite careful curation of personal details and delineating the narrator's time-bound identity, as author I remain vulnerable to the possibility that future audiences may ask questions about the parts of my life I have chosen to omit from the text. The PhD has given me the opportunity to reflect on the distinctions between a life and a story of a life. My postgraduate development has involved speaking events including panels at Hay Festival and Durham Book Festival in which I could practice speaking robustly about my work and my life in ways which do not compromise my privacy. I have also developed a professional writing practice, submitting material from the draft manuscript of *The Raven's Nest* for publication. University regulations require that the candidate does not self-plagiarise. It should be noted that a version of the chapter '*Mataræði* – 'Diet'' was published in *Earthlines Magazine* Issue 9 (2015); '*Smala og Slátur* – The Gathering and the Slaughter' was published on *Caught by the River* (2016) and '*Hvalurinn* – The Whale' was published in *Ós* Journal Issue 3 (2018). These journals allowed me to retain full copyright. The remaining chapters included here are unpublished.

Protecting others

The experience drawn upon in the memoir spans from 2008 to 2014. The PhD was undertaken between 2015 and 2019. While the memoir's time frame ends at the break down of the narrator's marriage in 2014, life and its associated relationships – strained or not – continued while the memoir was being written. In subsequent years the status of those relationships has changed with changes in circumstance. At the time of writing in 2019, my divorce and material disentanglement from my ex-husband is complete – a protracted process which spanned the first two years of the PhD. Following a period of strained relations, I am now on good terms but not in regular contact with my ex-husband. My ex-in-laws and I, however, are estranged. I remain friends with 'Salvar' and 'Natalía' but not in regular contact, and I remain on good and uncomplicated terms with the memoir's other characters.

This shifting territory yields ethical considerations as emotion and insight inevitably plays into the creative construction of the text. I cannot know, for example, if my ex- in-laws are happy that I am writing about them, and I do not have the possibility to discuss my manuscript with them directly. I have not knowingly written anything inflammatory about any character, but I cannot control characters' responses to their portrayal.

If we accept that a memoir is a subjective creative construction, *and* that the author cares about the feelings of those she writes about, steps can and should be taken to protect their privacy and to acknowledge their subjective experience, if not to include it. My decision was that where possible, key characters would be allowed the opportunity to have an input, while not impacting on the form. This input might be through corroboration of events prior to writing or being offered the opportunity to feedback on the manuscript. My intention was to include all key characters in this process.

In my case, as communication broke down with my in-laws, such conversations took place only with my ex-husband and with his aunt and uncle Salvar and Natalía. I sent draft chapters of the memoir to my ex-husband for 'fact-checking'. It was understood that he was free to show material to relevant others, and to 'fact-check' also with them. While he was diligent with objective fact-checking, when it came to my subjective rendering of events, his position was that it was indeed *my* story. I proceeded on this basis and ultimately stopped sending him drafts. As the manuscript reached a more polished stage, I gave it to him in its entirety. I requested that I received any issues or comments within four months, promising to take

them into account and make changes where reasonable. It remained his choice whether to read it at all. I did not receive any feedback.

As my story intersects with others' stories, two kinds of privacy are relevant here: the right to one's inner life not being public, and the right to not be physically recognised. Given that the thesis will be available online and the memoir may be published, and that the characters in the memoir are still alive and live in identifiable places, I have always taken steps to obscure their identifiability. Firstly, I characterise people in relation to the narrator. While the narrator's presence is as a lens on the world, the characters' presence occurs in glimpses. In no one chapter is any length given to describing a character in depth, aesthetically or in terms of personality. For example, 'Bjarni', the narrator's partner, in earlier chapters is described through lines of dialogue, text messages he sends, the stories he tells and my unfolding feelings towards him (see for example 'The Seal Wife' (p.54)). 'The Frozen Bell' (p.87) weaves the moment he takes a job on a trawler, becoming absent from my daily existence, into a broader narrative of the paused momentum of winter. Physically absent much of the time thereafter, his presence is evoked in the text through memories and references (see for example '*Göng* – passage, corridor, tunnel' (p.138)). Through this strategy, the reader is offered a sense of the characters which serves the narrative, but not the people in an immediately recognisable form.

Most significantly I have changed all the names of major characters (who are not merely devices). Originally, I enquired of my ex-husband if he would like names to be changed. He declined, arguing that he is resilient enough to deal with attention associated with this memoir ultimately being published, should it come. However, this position is likely to conflict with institutional ethics, however undefined in my case. The University wishes to be robust to future scenarios. Should the memoir be published by a publishing house, for example, name changes would need to be applied consistently across both thesis and memoir manuscript to avoid the possibility for cross checking and therefore traceability. Acknowledging that names are often entangled with people's characteristics, rather than choosing randomly, I have chosen names which are to an extent archetypal of the character or relate to a detail of their biography. My ex-father-in-law, for example has been named Haukur, which means Hawk in Icelandic. In the chapter '*Hvalurinn* – The Whale' it is particularly clear why this is appropriate.

Privacy and traceability have become growing concerns over the period of the PhD as tourism in Iceland increased exponentially, reaching numbers many times the population of

the country. Simultaneously Iceland has become a major location for film shoots, music videos, and a variety of smaller cultural and literary outputs. There is a growing trend in tourism visiting sites used particularly in films and music videos. Though I do not suggest that a memoir would have an equivalent effect to a Hollywood blockbuster, should *The Raven's Nest* become a popular title, with such a small population in Iceland my ex-husband would be easily traceable if I did not take measures to obscure his identity at this early stage.

Protecting place

As is evident from my ex-husband's response to my suggestion to change his name in the memoir, humans have the potential to be resilient. In the Anthropocene, I believe it is a writer's duty to consider also the rights of places to privacy, protection and appropriate portrayal. In an interview with Ida Olsen, Abi Andrews writes, 'I don't think we have time in our rapidly simplifying life-web to think that everything other than human is the domain of only "nature writers" and their readers. Every writer is a nature writer now'.[63] While my memoir's move to bring 'nature' to centre stage is itself an act of resistance to human centrality and therefore a gesture of protection, the intentional inclusion of the other-than-human as characters involves consideration of how best to write about ecologically fragile places which cannot defend themselves. In the case of Iceland, I write about places which need safeguarding in the face of rampant tourism *and* environmental collapse.

My concerns regarding its fragility are based on damage that is already occurring to the Icelandic landscape, and my writing underlines this fragility. While at the start of my relationship with Iceland it was peripheral to many people's imagination and visitor numbers were low, its role in the financial crisis of 2008, the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull volcano in 2010, and the subsequent tourism boom have contributed to its rising popularity with an annual tourist count which vastly exceeds the population, and has not been sustainably handled. In fragile terrain high footfall leads to rapid and damage which is hard to repair, so these places require considered treatment on and off the page.

[63] Abi Andrews, Ida Marie Olsen, 'Feminizing Wilderness Writing in the Anthropocene. An Exchange between Ida Olsen and Abi Andrews, Author of *The Word for Woman is Wilderness in Literature.green*, March 2019, www.literature.green/en/feminizing-wilderness-writing-in-the-anthropocene/ [accessed 27 March 2019]

I have done this in various ways. As my writing depends on place as an active protagonist, I am particularly interested in getting place right. This has implied the historic and topographic accuracy of particular places and also treating 'place' as animate. The thrust of the entire memoir is to demonstrate the interrelationship between people and place. This memoir does not paint Iceland as an untouched paradise to be explored, nor as an uninhabited wilderness. Nor does it shy away from including ecological disasters as encountered by the narrator (see for example the mass herring death in 'Herring Adventure' (p.179) and the increasing frequency of polar bear strandings in '*Þakkið*: Roof' (p.123).

Unlike the decision taken for my human characters, I did not change the names of places for two main reasons. In the Anthropocene there is a great need for true stories from places often not heard about, and from people often not heard about. With fictional place names, this text could be deemed to be entering into fictional territory and I wish the reader to feel the story is told by a trustworthy narrator relating an accurate account of her experience. I describe other ways I used to obscure exact locations below. Secondly, the places with which I related, and remain entangled, have names whose meanings are rooted in rich pasts and/or relate to their uses and topographies. Learning their names, their meanings and their histories was a fundamental part of what connected me to these places – a process demostrated in the narrator's langauge learning. It is also a process which has allowed me to connect more strongly to places with Old Norse place names upon returning to Britain, with Old Norse being so close to Icelandic. Naming them and describing them well, rather than simply as landscape or backdrop is part of how I defined 'getting them right'. They include farms (for example Gisholt in '*Gislholt*'; Ögur in '*Smala og Slátur* – The Gathering and the Slaughter'), rivers (for example *Hvalskurðurá* – 'whale cutting river' in '*Mataræði* – Diet') and volcanoes (for example Víti – 'Hell' in 'To Hell and Back'). With the significant places in the memoir given their original names, the knowledges relating to their histories and topograhies are brought to bear on the narrative.

A BBC Radio 3 programme *Into The Eerie* (2019) explored the work of artists and writers inspired by the 'Eerie' – the uncanny forces and buried histories resonating through a place. Author Helen Macdonald commented, 'With their inhabitation of a world which is shared with Others – both living and dead, the landscapes are re-mythologised'.[64] The programme

[64] *Into the Eerie* on BBC Radio 3 discusses re-mythologising of landscape as a tool for environmentalism with author Helen Macdonald https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0002zmr [accessed 3 March 2019] (19.11)

considered the re-mythologising of landscape as a possible tool for environmentalism, with its acknowledgment of place as a space that is shared across both time and species.

Such sharing is a trope of *The Raven's Nest* and the identities and locations of places are obscured by the manner in which they are described or evoked. The sea, wind, and rocks speak (see 'The Strangest Silence'), the mountains cut out the light (for example Hnífsdalur ('Knife valley') in 'The Frozen Bell'), ghosts are recognised (see '*Göng* – passage/ corridor/ tunnel') and quartz pebbles illuminate (see 'Seal Wife'). Sometimes, a place name does the work of evoking an atmosphere which lends the prose a mythic quality (for example the waterfall Dynjandi ('making a din') in '*Trúlofuð* – Engagement'. Other-than-human co-dwellers such as seals, ravens and whales are returned to along different lines of enquiry and offer a variety of truths. A lack of resolution becomes characteristic and does not allow the reader to walk away with 'facts' but rather the senses of a place and its inhabitants. These places and beings arguably have a greater effect on the narrator than the people with whom she is involved. Together these techniques lend the prose an ambiguity where the line between the real and the mythic is blurred.

In 2017 at the NonfictioNow conference, which that year took place in Reykjavík, I participated in a panel, *Dreamed Faces on Solid Seas*, which discussed these themes – how writers represent place, the effect the place has on us as writers, and the effect our writing has on the place in the context of Iceland's exponential rise in tourism. I shared the panel with three other writers of fiction and non-fiction for whom Iceland was central to their work: saga scholar Emily Lethbridge and novelist Dani Redd, chaired by novelist Rowan Hisayo Buchanan.

At this conference, two comments from colleagues stuck with me, and confirmed to me that my writing and my approach had integrity. The conference's location in Reykjavík meant that it attracted delegates from the circumpolar North. In the panel, I had read an extract from my memoir chapter 'The Frozen Bell', which describes the moment the light first returns after a long winter. When it came to take questions from the audience, a delegate, who it emerged was a writer and dog sled guide living in Svalbard, raised her hand. '*Damn!* You really nailed it! How did you *do* that?' was all she had to say.

In the panel I had also mentioned how I thought the uncontrolled growth of the tourism industry was not considering the long-term impact on the fragile ecology of Iceland, which was the industry's Unique Selling Point, not to mention of immense worth in and of itself.

Unchecked, the sheer number of tourists would destroy the very thing they came to experience. I had suggested this kind of tourist industry was a 21st century equivalent to the herring boom, which had resulted in total herring stock depletion by the late 1960s. Later, I slipped away from the conference to a nearby petrol station to buy a hot dog – the only affordable food one can find 'eating out' in Reykjavík since the economy strengthened thanks to the aforementioned tourism boom. There, I found an Icelandic writer who clearly had the same idea, and who had been present at my panel. We ate, sat on high stools at a laminated counter, while staring out at a large car park that is not part of the tourist aesthetic experience and trying not to get remoulade all over our fingers.

'I've been thinking about the herring,' he said. 'I think you're probably right. But Icelanders don't think like that. We just think about now.'

Sometimes, it takes an outsider to see what an insider cannot see.

Bibliography

Abram, David. 1996. *The Spell of The Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage)

— 2011 *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Vintage)

Alaimo, Stacy. 2010. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press)

Andrews, Abi. 2018. *The Word for Woman is Wilderness* (London: Serpent's Tail)

— 'A Novel is a Medicine Bundle', *The Dark Mountain Project* online, 2 July 2018 https://dark-mountain.net/a-novel-is-a-medicine-bundle/ [accessed 3 May 2019]

Andrews, Abi, and I. M. Olsen. 'Feminizing Wilderness Writing in the Anthropocene. An Exchange between Ida Olsen and Abi Andrews, Author of *The Word for Woman is Wilderness*', *Literature.green*, March 2019 <www.literature.green/en/feminizing-wilderness-writing-in-the-anthropocene/> [accessed May 3 2019]

Appleton, Jay. 1996. *The Experience of Landscape* (London: Wiley-Blackwell)

Armbruster, Karla & Wallace, Kathleen (eds.). 2001. *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press)

Astley, Neil. (ed.). 2007 *Earth Shattering: Ecopoems* (Tarset: Bloodaxe)

Baker, J.A. 2010. *The Peregrine: The Hill of Summer & Diaries* (London: Harper Collins)

Bárðarson, Hjálmar, R. 1986. *Birds of Iceland*, trans. by Julian Meldon (Reykjavík: Hjálmar Bárðarson)

Bateson, Mary Catherine. 1989. *Composing A Life* (New York: the Atlantic Monthly Press)

Beckett, Fiona, and T. Gifford (eds.). 2007. *Culture, Creativity and Environment: New Environmentalist Criticism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi)

Behar, Ruth. 1996. *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks your Heart* (Massachusetts: Beacon Press)

— 2013. *Travelling Heavy: A Memoir In Between Journeys* (Durham and London: Duke University Press)

Bennet, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press)

Berger, John. 2005. *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (London: Bloomsbury)

— 2015. *Bento's Sketchbook*, 2nd edn (London: Verso)

Berry, Wendell. 2017. *The World Ending Fire: The Essential Wendell Berry*, selected and introduced by Paul Kingsnorth (London: Allen Lane)

Birkhead, Tim. 1993. *Great Auk Islands: A field biologist in the Arctic* (Sandiego: Academic Press Inc.)

— 2017. *The Most Perfect Thing: Inside (and Outside) a Bird's Egg*, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury)
Björsson, Árni. 1980. *Icelandic Feasts and Holidays* (Reykjavík: Iceland Review)

Blackie, Sharon, and David Knowles (eds.). 2012. *Entanglements: New Ecopoems* (Stornoway: Two Ravens Press)

Blackie, Sharon. 2016. *If Women Rose Rooted: A Journey to Authenticity and Belonging* (Tewkesbury: September Publishing)

Bloom, Lisa.1993. *Gender On Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press)

Blueberry Soup, dir. by Eileen Jerret (Wilma's Wish Productions, 2013).

Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books)

Boyne, John, ‘Women are better writers than men: Novelist John Boyne sets the record straight’, *Guardian* online, 12th December 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/dec/12/double-x-factor-why-women-are-better-writers-than-men> [accessed 3 May 2019}

Brace, Catherine. and A. Johns-Putra (eds.). 2010. *Process: Landscape and Text.* (Rodopi: Amsterdam)

Brady, Emily. 2003. *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press)

Branch, M.P. and Slovic, S. (eds.). 2003. *The ISLE reader: Ecocriticism, 1993-2003* Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press

Bridle, James. 2018. *A New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (London: Verso)

Brody, Hugh. 2002. *Maps and Dreams.* (London: Faber and Faber)

Brown, C.S. and Toadvine, T. (eds.). 2003. *Eco-phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself.* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press)

Buell, Lawrence. 1996. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press)

— 2005. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (London: Blackwell)

Butler, Judith. 1999. *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge)

— 2009. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable* (London: Verso Books)

Campbell, Nancy. 2013. ‘Susan Richardson – Writing in the Language of Ice’, *The*

Huffington Post, 8th March 2013 <www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/nancy-campbell/susan-richardson-writing-_b_2831291.html> [accessed 3 May 2019]

— 2018. *The Library of Ice* (London: Simon & Schuster)

Canton, James. 'Untangling British Nature Writing', *Earthlines*, 1 (May 2012), pp.12-16

Carrington, Damian. 'The Anthropocene epoch: Scientists declare dawn of human-influenced age', *Guardian* online, 29th August 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/aug/29/declare-anthropocene-epoch-experts-urge-geological-congress-human-impact-earth> [accessed 3 May 2019]

Carrington, Damian. 'Humans just 0.01% of all life but have destroyed 83% of wild mammals – study', *Guardian* online, 21st May 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/may/21/human-race-just-001-of-all-life-but-has-destroyed-over-80-of-wild-mammals-study> [accessed 11 February 2019]

Carson, Rachel. 2000. *Silent Spring*, 7th edn (London: Penguin Books)

Carson, Anne. 2010. *Nox* (New York: New Directions)

Challenger, Melanie. 2011. *On Extinction: How We Became Estranged from Nature* (London: Granta)

Cixous Hélène. 1976. 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. By Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1(4) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp. 875-893

Clark, Samantha. 2013. 'Strange strangers and uncanny hammers: Morton's The Ecological Thought and the phenomenological tradition', *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, 17 (2), pp. 98-108 < https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2013.800339> [accessed 4 May 2019]

Clark, Timothy. 2011. *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Clarke, Gillian. 2008. *At the Source: A Writer's Year* (Manchester: Carcanet)

Cocker, Mark. ‘Country Diary: Corvids Build Castles in the Sky’, *Guardian* online, 2nd May 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/may/02/corvids-build-castles-sky-country-diary> [accessed 3 May 2019]

Colusso, Enrica. 2017. ‘The space between the film maker and the subject – the ethical encounter’, *Studies in Documentary Film*, 11(2), pp.141-156 <https://doi.org/10.1080/17503280.2017.1342072>

Coupe, Laurence. (ed.) *The Green Studies Reader. From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*. (London: Routledge)

Coutts, Marion. 2014. *The Iceberg: A Memoir* (London: Atlantic Books)

Crichton Smith, Iain. 1986. ‘Real People in a Real Place’, *Towards the Human* (Midlothian: Loanhead) pp. 13-70

Davidson, Hilda E. 1990. *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 2nd edn (London: Penguin Books)

Davidson, Peter. 2016. *The Idea of North,* 2nd edn (London: Reaktion Books)

— 2013. *Distance and Memory* (Manchester: Carcanet Press)

Deakin, Roger. 2007. *Wildwood: A Journey Through Trees* (London: Hamish Hamilton)

Dee, Tim. 2010. *The Running Sky* (London: Vintage)

— 2013. *Four Fields* (London: Jonathan Cape)

— 2018. (ed.) *Ground Work: Writing on Places and People* (London: Jonathan Cape)

Demos, T.J. 2016. *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press)

Descola, Phillipe, and Gísli Pálsson (eds.). 1996. *Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives* (London & New York: Routledge)

Dillard, Annie. 2011. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 4th edn (London: Canterbury Press)

Dillard, Annie. 'To Fashion a Text' in Zinsser, W. (ed.) (1987) *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (Boston: Hougton)

Ehrlich, Gretel. 2002. *This Cold Heaven: Seven Seasons in Greenland* (London: Fourth Estate)

Eir, Oddný. 2016. *Land of Love and Ruins*, trans. By Philip Roughton (Brooklyn: Restless Books)

Elphinstone, Margaret. 2000. *The Sea Road* (Edinburgh: Canongate)

— 2002. *Hy Brasil* (Edinburgh: Canongate)

— 2010. *The Gathering Night* (Edinburgh: Canongate)

European Commission *Causes of Climate Change* <https://ec.europa.eu/clima/change/causes_en> [accessed 3 May 2019]

Evans, Gareth and Robertson, Di (eds.). 2010. *Towards Re-Enchantment: Place and its Meanings* (London: Artevents)

Farley, Paul and Michael Symmons Roberts (eds.). 2011. *Edgelands: Journeys into England's True Wildernesses* (London: Jonathan Cape)

Ferðafélag Íslands Árbók 1939 (Reykjavík: Ísafoldarprentsmiðja)

Fisher, Elizabeth. 1979. *Woman's Creation: Sexual Evolution and the Shaping of Society* (London: Wildwood House)

Fitter, Chris. 2005. *Poetry, Space, Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Flader, Susan. 1994. *Thinking Like a Mountain: Aldo Leopold and the Evolution of an Ecological Attitude toward Deer, Wolves and Forests* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press)

Fowles, John. 2010. *The Tree*, 2nd edn (New York: Harper Collins)

Francis, Gavin. 2008. *True North: Travels in Arctic Europe* (Edinburgh: Polygon)

Fuller, Alexandra. 2001. *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood* (New York: Randomhouse)

— 2015. *Leaving Before the Rains Come* (London: Harvill Secker

Galloway, Kathy. 1999. *A Story to Live By* (London: SPCK)

Garrard, Greg. 2011. *Ecocriticism,* 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge)

Gibson, J., W. Huemer and L. Pocci (eds.). 2007. *A sense of the world: Essays on fiction, narrative, and knowledge* (London: Routledge)

Gifford, Terry. 1996. *John Muir: His Life and Letters and Other Writings* (Seattle, Washington: Baton Wicks)

— 1999. *Pastoral* (London: Routledge)

— 2006. *Reconnecting with John Muir: Essays in Post-Pastoral Practice* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press)

— 2011. *Green Voices* (Nottingham: Critical, Cultural and Communications Press)

Glotfelty, C., and H. Fromm (eds.). 1996. *The Ecocriticism Reader.* Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press

Gornick, Vivian. 2001. *The Situation and the Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux)

Gosh, Amitav. 2016. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and The Unthinkable* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press)

Grace, Sherrill E. 1997. 'Gendering Northern Narrative' in John G. Moss (ed.) *Echoing*

Silence: Essays on Arctic Narrative (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press), pp.163-182

— *2001. Canada and the Idea of North* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill – Queen's University Press)

Granta: *The Magazine of New* Writing, 102 (Summer 2008) 'The New Nature Writing'

Granta The Magazine of New Writing, 133 (Autumn 2015) 'What Have We Done'

Griffiths, Jay. 2008. *Wild: An Elemental Journey,* 3rd edn (London: Penguin)

Greenlaw, Lavinia. 2011. *Questions of Travel: William Morris in Iceland* (Honiton, Devon: Notting Hill Editions)

Grimshaw, Anna. and A. Ravetz, (eds.) 2005. *Visualizing Anthropology* (Bristol: Intellect)

Gunn, Kirsty. 2015. *My Katherine Mansfield Project* (Honiton, Devon: Notting Hill Editions)

Guss, David M. 1986. *The Language of the Birds: Tales, Texts, Poems of Interspecies Communication* (Berkley: North Point Press)

Halperin, Ilana. 2010. *Physical Geology: A Field Guide to Body Mineralogy and Other New Landmass* (Berlin: Berliner Medizinhistoriches Museum der Charité)

Hansell, Mike. 2000. *Bird Nests and Construction Behaviour.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

— 2005. *Animal Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Haraway, Donna. 1991. *Simians Cyborgs and Women: The Re-Invention of Nature* (New York: Routledge)

— 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press)

Hartigan, John Jr. 2014. *Aesop's Anthropology: A Multispecies Approach* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press)

Hastrup, Kirsten. 1998. *A Place Apart: An anthropological study of the Icelandic world* (Oxford: The Oxford University Press)

Hecht, Brooke. 2017. 'On the Wild Edge In Iceland' in Gavin Van Hord & John Hausdoerffer (eds.), *Wildness: Relations of People and Place* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press)

Heidegger, Martin. 1971. 'Building Dwelling Thinking', *Poetry, Language Thought* (New York: Harper Collins).

Heijnen, Adriënne. 2013. *The Social Life of Dreams: A Thousand Years of Negotiated Meanings in Iceland* (Münster: LIT Verlag)

Heise, Ursula K. 2008. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet. The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Heldreth, Lilian M. 'To Defend or to Correct: Patterns of Culture in *Always Coming Home*', Mythlore 59, 16.1 (Autumn 1989), pp.58-62

Hennig, R., A. Jonasson and P. Degerman (eds.) 2018. *Nordic Narratives of Nature and the Environment: Ecocritical Approaches to Northern European Literatures and Cultures* (Lanham: Lexington Books)

Hoyle, Gwyneth. 2001. *Flowers in the Snow: The Life of Isobel Wylie Hutchison* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press)

Horn, Roni. 'The Nothing That Is', *Morgunblaðið*, 6th September 1998

— *Vatnasafn/ Library of Water* (London: Artangel and Göttingen: Steidl)

Hulme, Mike. 2017. *Weathered: Cultures of Climate* (London: Sage)

Ingold, Tim. 1987. *The Appropriation of Nature: Essays on Human Ecology and Social*

Relations (Iowa: University of Iowa Press)

1993. 'The Temporality of the Landscape', *World Archaeology*, 25 (2): Conceptions of Time and Ancient Society (October 1993), pp.152-174

— 2000a. 'Building, dwelling, living: How animals and people make themselves at home in the world', *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (Oxon: Routledge), pp. 172-188

— 2000b. 'On weaving a basket' in *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (Oxon: Routledge) pp. 339-348

— 2007. *Lines: A Brief History* (Oxon: Routlege)

— 2010. 'The textility of making', *Cambridge Journal of Economics,* 34 (1), pp.91-102

— 2011. *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description.* Oxon: Routlege

Ingold, Tim. and J. Vergunst (eds.). 2008. *Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot* (Aldershot: Ashgate)

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. 2014. *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability* http://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/wg2/ [accessed 3 May 2019]

'Into the Eerie'*, Sunday Feature*, BBC Radio 3, 3rd March 2019, 18.45.

Irigaray, Luce. 1977. *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press)

— 1992 *Elemental Passions* trans. by Joanne Collie and Judith Still (London: The Athalone Press)

Ísleifsson, Sumarliði R. and Daniel Chartier (eds.) 2011. *Iceland and Images of the North* (Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec)

Jack, Ian. 'Memories are made of this – and that', *Guardian* online, 8th February 2003 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/feb/08/featuresreviews.guardianreview25>

[accessed 3 May 2019]

Jamie, Kathleen. 2002. *Among Muslims* (London: Sort of Books)

— 2005. *Findings* (London: Sort of Books)

— 2008. 'A Lone Enraptured Male', Review: Robert Macfarlane's *The Wild Places*, *London Review of Books* 30 (5), 6th March 2008, pp.25-27

— 2012. *Sightlines* (London: Sort of Books)

Jannson, Tove. 2003. *The Summer Book*, trans by T. Teal, 2nd edn in English (London: Sortof Books).

— 2019. 'The Island', trans. By Hernan Diaz, *The Paris Review,* February 13th 2019 <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/02/13/tove-janssons-the-island/> [accessed 3 May 2019]

Jenssen, Toril. 2009. *Behind the Eye: Reflexive Methods in Culture Studies, Ethnographic Film, and Visual Media* (Hojbjerg: Intervention Press)

Jóhannesdóttir, Guðbjörg R. and Thorgeirsdóttir, Sigriður. 2016. 'Reclaiming Nature by Reclaiming the Body', *Balkan Journal of Philosophy,* 8 (1), pp.39-48

Kenney, Martha. 2017. 'Donna Haraway (2016) Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene', Book review, *Science & Technology Studies* 30 (2), pp.73-76

Kerridge, R., and N. Sammells (eds.). 1998. *Writing the Environment: Ecocentrism and Literature* (London: Zed Books)

Kerrigan, John. 2008. *Archipelagic English: Literature, History and Politics 1603-1717* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Kjeldaas, Sigfrid. 2015. 'Landscape and Vision in Gretel Ehrlich's This Cold Heaven: Seven Seasons in Greenland', *Nordlit,* 35 <http://dx.doi.org/10.7557/13.3436> [accessed 6 May 2019]

Knickerbocker, Scott. 2012. *Ecopoetics: The Nature of Language, The Language of Nature.* (Boston: The University of Massachusetts Press)

Kolbert, Elizabeth (ed.). 2007. *The Ends of The Earth: An Anthology of the Finest Writing on the Arctic and the Antarctic,* Volume I: The Arctic (London: Granta)

Kristeva, Julia. 1984. *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York and Chichester: Colombia University Press)

Krikorian, Tamara. 2002. '"On the Mountain" and "Land Makar": Landscape and Townscape in Margaret Tait's work', in *The Undercut Reader: Critical Writings on Artists' Film and Video*, ed. by Michael Maziere and Nina Danino (London: Wallflower)

Kristinsson, Hörður. 2013. *A Guide to the Flowering Plants and Ferns of Iceland.* (Reykjavík: Mál og Menning)

Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press)

Larrington, Carolyne. 1999. 'Land of ice and fire. Review: Kirsten Hastrup's *A Place Apart* and Terry Lacey's *Ring of Seasons*', *Times Literary Supplement*, January 8th 1999 < https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/private/land-of-ice-and-fire/> [accessed 4 May 2019]

Law, John. 2004. *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (London and New York: Routlege)

Lederach, J.P and Lederach, A. J. 2010. *When Blood and Bones Cry Out: Journeys through the Soundscape of Healing and Reconciliation* (New York: Oxford University Press)

Lynch, T., C. Glotfelty and K. Armbruster (eds.) *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology and Place* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press)

Laxness, Halldór. 2001. *Independent People*, trans. By J.A. Thompson, 2nd edn in English (London: The Harvill Press)

Le Guin, Ursula K. 1989. 'World Making', *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (New York: Grove Press), pp.46-48

— 1989. 'Woman/ Wilderness' in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*, ed. by Ursula K. Le Guin (New York: Grove Press), pp.161-164

— 1989. 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women Places,* ed. by Ursula K. Le Guin (New York: Grove Press), pp. 165-170

— 2016. 'Crossing Back from the Silence', *Talking on the Water: Conversations about Nature and Creativity,* ed. by Jonathan White (San Antonio: Trinity University Press), pp.99-120

— 2016. *Always Coming Home* (London: Orion) (First published 1985)

Lessing, Doris. 2007. *The Grass is Singing*, 5th edn (London: Harper Perennial)

Lilley, Deborah. 2013. 'Kathleen Jamie: rethinking the externality and idealization of nature, *Green Letters*, 17 (1), pp. 16-26 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2012.750841>

Liptrot, Amy. 2016. *The Outrun* (Edinburgh and London: Canongate)

Loizos, Peter. 1993. *Innovation in Ethnographic Film: From Innocence to Self-consciousness 1955 – 85*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press)

Lopez, Barry. 1998. *About This Life: Journeys on the Threshold of Memory* (New York: Vintage)

—2007 (ed.). *The Future of Nature: Writing on a Human Ecology from Orion Magazine* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions)

— 2014. *Arctic Dreams*, 3rd edn (London: Vintage)

— 2015 'The Invitation', *Granta: The Magazine of New Writing,*133 ('What Have We Done?') pp.13-17

Lorimer, Hayden. 2018. ‘Dearly Departed: Writing the Lifeworlds of Place’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* 44, pp.331-345 <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12278> [accessed 3 May 2019]

Mabey, Richard. 1980. *The Common Ground: A Place for Nature in Britain's Future?* (Hutchinson: Nature Conservancy Council)

— ‘Richard Mabey: In defence of nature writing’, *Guardian* online, 18th July 2013 <www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jul/18/richard-mabey-defence-nature-writing>

— 2008. *Nature Cure* (London: Vintage)

MacAulay, John M. 1998. *Seal-Folk and Ocean Paddlers* (Cambridge and Isle of Harris: White Horse Press)

Macdonald, Helen. 2014. *H is for Hawk* (London: Jonathan Cape)

— ‘On Nests and Eggs’, In Andy Holden & Peter Holden *A Natural History of Nest Building*. Text accompanying the Artangel exhibition *Natural Selection* 2017 – 2018.

Macfarlane, Robert. 2003. *Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination* (London and New York: Granta Books and Pantheon Books)

— 2007. *The Wild Places* (London and New York: Granta Books and Penguin Books)

— 2010. ‘A Counter-Desecration Phrasebook’, in *Towards Re-Enchantment: Place and Its Meanings*, ed. by Gareth Evans and Di Robson (London: Artevents) pp.107-130

— 2012. *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (London and New York: Penguin Hamish Hamilton and Viking)

— 2013. *Holloway*. London: Faber

— 2015. *Landmarks*. London: Hamish Hamilton

— 2019. ‘Horizon by Barry Lopez review – magnificent on the natural world, and furious too’, *Guardian* online https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/mar/14/horizon-by-barry-lopez-review [accessed 14 March 2019]

MacDougall, David. 2006. *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography and the Senses* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press)

Maftei, Micaela. 2013. *The Fiction of Autobiography: Reading and Writing Identity* (New York: Bloomsbury)

Magnason, Andri Snær. 2008. *Dreamland: A Self-Help Manual for a Frightened Nation* (London: Citizen Press)

— 2018. ‘N64 35.378, W16 44.69’ in *Dark Mountain Issue 14: TERRA* (The Dark Mountain Project)

Maitland, Sara. 2008. *A Book of Silence* (London: Granta)

— 2012. *Gossip from the Forest* (London: Granta)

Marks, Laura. 2004. ‘Haptic Visuality: Touching with the Eyes’, *Framework: The Finnish Art Review,* 2 (November).

— 2002) *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press)

Marland, Pippa. 2015. ‘The gannet’s skull versus the plastic doll’s head: material ‘value’ in Kathleen Jamie’s ‘Findings’, *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism,*19 (2) (March 2015) pp.121-131 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2015.1024156> [accessed 4 May 2019]

McCormack, Mike. 2016. *Solar Bones* (Edinburgh: Canongate)

McKibben, Bill. 2003. *The End of Nature* (London: Bloomsbury)

— 2008. (ed.). *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau* (New York:

Literary Classics of the United States)

McKuisick, J. 2000. *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (Basingstoke: Macmillan)

Mendelson, Daniel, 'But Enough About Me: What does the popularity of memoirs tell us about ourselves?', *The New Yorker,* January 17th 2010 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/01/25/but-enough-about-me-2> [accessed May 3 2019]

Merchant, Carolyn. 1980. *The Death of Nature*

Monbiot, George. 2013. *Feral: Searching for Enchantment on the Frontiers of Rewilding* (London: Allen Lane)

Moon, Won-Leep. 2018. 'Documentary and its realism', in *Studies in Documentary Film,* 12 (1), pp. 43-55

Morton, Timothy. 2010. *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press)

— 2013. *Hyperobjects.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press)

Moss, John (ed.) *Echoing Silence: Essays on Arctic Narrative* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1997)

Moss, Sarah. 2012 *Names for the Sea: Strangers In Iceland* (London: Granta)

Muir, John. 1913. *The Story of my Boyhood and Youth* (Boston And New York: Houghton Mifflin Company)

— 1916. *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf* (Boston And New York: Houghton Mifflin Company)

— 1988. *My First Summer in the Sierra* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books) (originally published 1911)

Murphy, Patrick D. 2009. *Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies*: *Fences, Boundaries and Fields*. Idaho Falls: Lexington

Myles, Eileen. 2009. *The Importance of Being Iceland: Travel Essays in Art* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e))

Nabokov, V. 2000. *Speak, Memory* (London: Penguin Books)

Neely, Sarah (ed.) 2012. *Margaret Tait: Poems, Stories and Writings* (Manchester: Carcanet)

— 2017. *Between Categories. The Films of Margaret Tait: Portraits, Poetry, Sound and Place* (Bern: Peter Lang)

Nin, Anaïs. 1979. *The Journals of Anaïs Nin 1934 -1939*, 3rd edn (London: Quartet Books)

Norbury, Katharine. 2015. *The Fish Ladder: A Journey Upstream* (London: Bloomsbury)

OED Online, Oxford University Press, March 2019 <www.oed.com/view/Entry/398463> [accessed 1 April 2019]

Oslund, Karen. 2011. *Iceland Imagined: Nature, Culture and Storytelling in the North Atlantic* (Seattle: University of Washington Press)

Óskarsson, G. J., Ólafsdóttir, S.R., Sigurðsson, Þ. and Valdimarsson H. 2018. 'Observation and quantification of two incidents of mass fish kill of Icelandic summer spawning herring (*Clupea harengus*) in the winter 2012/2013', *Fisheries Oceanography*, 27 (4) (2018), pp. 302-311 <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/10.1111/fog.12253>

Parham, J. 2002. *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate)

Pavlos Holmes, S. 2013. *Facing the Change: Personal Encounters with Global Warming* (Salt Lake City UT: Torrey House Press)

Peacock, Charlotte. 2017. *Into the Mountain: A Life of Nan Shepherd* (Cambridge: Galileo Publishers)

Peacock, James L. 2001. *The Anthropological Lens: Harsh Light, Soft Focus,* 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Phillips, Dana. 2003. 'What do Nature Writers Want?', *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture and Literature in America* (New York: Oxford University Press)

Pink, Sarah. 2006. *The Future of Visual Anthropology: Engaging the Senses* (London; New York: Routledge)

Pirie, Alex. 2000. 'Margaret Tait Film Maker 1918-1999: Indications Influence Outcomes', *Poem Film Film Poem*, 6, pp. 1-12

Plumwood, Val (1993) *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London and New York: Routledge)

Popova, M. 'How to Own Your Story: Vivian Gornick on the Art of Personal Narrative and the Power of Textured Storytelling' *Brainpickings* <https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/06/22/vivian-gornick-the-situation-and-the-story-personal-narrative/> [accessed 3 May 2019]

Popova, M. 'The Mystery of Personal Identity: What Makes You and Your Childhood Self the Same Person Despite a Lifetime of Change', *Brainpickings* <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/10/07/rebecca-goldstein-personal-identity/> [accessed 3 May 2019]

Powers, Richard (2018) *The Overstory* (London: William Heinemann)

Rapley, C. G., de Meyer, K., Carney, J., Clarke, R., Howarth, C., Smith, N., Stilgoe, J., Youngs, S., Brierley, C., Haugvaldstad, A., Lotto, B., Michie, S., Shipworth, M., Tuckett, D. (eds.). 2014. 'Telling Tales: The Compelling Power of Narratives', *Time for Change? Climate Science Reconsidered, Report of the UCL Policy Commission on Communicating Climate Science* (London: UCL)

Ritter, Christiane. 2010. *A Woman in the Polar Night,* trans. by Jane Degras, 2nd edn (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press)

Roberts, Callum. 2013. *Ocean of Life: How our seas are changing*, 2nd edn (London: Penguin)

Rochelle, Warren G. 2001. *Communities of the Heart: The Rhetoric of Myth in the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press)

Rose, Gillian.1993. *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press)

The Royal Society. 2014. *Climate Change Evidence & Causes: An overview from the Royal Society and the US National Academy of Sciences* <https://royalsociety.org/~/media/Royal_Society_Content/policy/projects/climate-evidence-causes/climate-change-evidence-causes.pdf> [accessed 3 May 2018]

Rustin, Susannah. 'Rebecca Solnit: A Life in Writing', *Guardian* online 29th June 2013 <www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/29/rebecca-solnit-california-dreaming-life> [accessed 2 May 2019]

Sandilands, Catriona. 1999. *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press)

Savi, Melina P. 2017. 'The Anthropocene (and) (in) the Humanities: Possibilities for Literary Studies', *Estudos Feministas, Florianopolis,* 25(2) (May-Aug 2017), pp.945-959 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1806-9584.2017v25n2p945> [accessed 4 May 2019]

Schama, Simon. (1996) *Landscape and Memory* 2nd edn (London: Fontana Press)

Shand, Ryan. 2007. 'Review: Subjects and Sequences: A Margaret Tait Reader by Peter Todd and Benjamin Cook', *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists,* 7 (1) (Spring 2007), pp.107-110 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41167280>

Shepherd, Nan. 2011. *The Living Mountain* (Edinburgh and London: Canongate)

Siddall, S. 2009. *Landscape and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Sigurðsson, Arngrímur. 1983. *Icelandic – English Dictionary* (Reykjavík: Ísafoldarprentsmiðja H.F.)

Sjón. 2008. *The Blue Fox*, trans. by Victoria Cribb (London: Telegram)

Smith, Jos. 2013. 'An archipelagic literature: re-framing "The New Nature Writing"', *Green Letters:Studies in Ecocriticism*, 17 (1) (February 2013), pp.5-15 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2012.750840> [accessed 4 May 2019]

— 2017. *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place* (London: Bloomsbury Academic)

Smith, Ali. 'Lights on a String. Review: The Summer Book By Tove Jansson', *Guardian* online, 12th July 2003 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/jul/12/fiction.alismith> [accessed 3 May 2019]

Solnit, Rebecca. 1994. *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Hidden Wars of the American West* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press)

— 2001. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (London: Verso)

— 2006. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (London: Canongate)

— 2011. *A Book of Migrations* (London and New York: Verso)

— 2013. *The Faraway Nearby* (London: Granta)

— 2014a. 'News from Nowhere: Iceland's Polite Dystopia' in *The Encyclopedia of Trouble and Spaciousness* (San Antonio, Texas: Trinity University Press) pp.159-172

— 2014b. 'The Volcano Erupts: Iceland in Upheaval' in *The Encyclopedia of Trouble and Spaciousness* (San Antonio, Texas: Trinity University Press) pp.173-181

— 2014c. 'Journey to the Centre (on Elín Hansdóttir´s Labyrith *Path*)' in *The Encyclopedia of Trouble and Spaciousness* (San Antonio, Texas: Trinity University Press)

pp. 203-212

— 2018. *Call Them by Their True Names: American Crises (and Essays)* (London: Granta)

Sontag, Susan. 1977. *On Photography* 3rd edn (New York: Picador)

Soper, Kate. 1995. *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-human* (London: Wiley/Blackwell)

Spufford, Francis. 2003. *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination* 2nd edn (London: Faber & Faber)

Stenton, D., A. Keenleyside, S. Fratpietro, and R. Park. 2017. 'DNA analysis of human skeletal remains from the 1845 Franklin expedition', *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports,* 16 (December 2017), pp.409-419 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jasrep.2017.03.041> [accessed 4 May 2019]

Stoller, Paul. 1997. *Sensuous Scholarship* (Philadelphia: PA: University of Pennsylvania Press)

Stone, Alison. 2006. *Luce Irigaray and The Philosophy of Sexual Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Strayed, Cheryl. 2013. *Wild: A Journey from Lost to Found* (London: Atlantic Books)

Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy. 2018. *Working Group on the 'Anthropocene'* <http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/workinggroups/anthropocene/> [accessed 4 May 2019]

Tallack, Mallachy. 2015. *66 Degrees North: Around the World in Search of Home* (Edinburgh: Polygon)

Tait, Margaret. 1955. *Orquil Burn*, online video recording, National Library of Scotland Moving Image Archive <https://movingimage.nls.uk/film/6221> [accessed 3 November, 2018]

—1960. *The Hen and the Bees: Legends and Lyrics* (Glasgow: University Press)

— 1976. *Place of Work,* online video recording, National Library of Scotland Moving Image Archive <https://movingimage.nls.uk/film/6230> [accessed 18 February 2019]

— 1997. 'Film-poem or poem-film: A few notes about Film and Poetry', *Poem Film Film Poem,* 2, pp.4-5

Thomashow, Mitchell. 2001. *Bringing the Biosphere Home: Learning to Perceive Global Environmental Change* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press)

Tomasson, Richard F. 1980. *Iceland: The First New Society* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press)

Thompson, Peter. 1995. *Shooting in the Dark: Notes on Preparing to Film in the Field* <http://carbonfarm.us/365/readings/What_I_Learned_in_a_Hut.pdf> [accessed 3 May 2019]

Thoreau, Henry D. 1992. *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (London: David Campbell)

Todd, Peter, and B. Cook (eds.). 2004. *Subjects and Sequences: A Margaret Tait Reader* (London: LUX)

Tsing, Anna. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capiltalist Ruins* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press)

Tsing, A., H. Swanson, E. Gan and N. Bubant (eds.). 2017. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*: *Ghosts of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press)

Tuhiwai-Smith, Linda. 2012. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books)

University of Cambridge, The Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic website, 'What are kennings?' <https://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/resources/mpvp/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/What-are-kennings.pdf> [accessed 4 May 2019]

Wheeler, Sarah. 2010. *The Magnetic North: Travels in the Arctic* (London: Vintage)

Willis, Alette. 2012. ‘Constructing a story to live by: Ethics, emotions and academic practice in the context of climate change’, *Emotion, Space and Society*, 5 (1) (February 2012) < http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2011.03.001> pp.52-59 [accessed 4 May 2019]

Winter, Kathleen. 2016. *Boundless: Adventures in the Northwest Passage* (London: Vintage)

Wollstonecraft, Mary. 2009. *Letters Written During a Short Residence Sweden, Norway and Denmark,* edited with an introduction by T. Brekke and J. Mee (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Woolf, Virginia. 2004. *A Room of One’s Own*, 3rd edn (London: Penguin Books)

— 2014. *Essays on the Self,* introduced by Joanna Kavenna (Devon: Notting Hill Editions)

Wylie Hutchison, Isobel. 1928. ‘A Walking Tour Across Iceland’, *National Geographic,* LIII (Jan-June) (Washington: National Geographic Society)

— 1930. *On Greenland’s Closed Shore: The Fairyland of the Arctic* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood & Sons)

— 1934. ‘It’s a long way to Akureyri’, *The American-Scandinavian Review*, 22 (2) pp.142-152

Witze, A. and Kanipe, J. 2014. *Island on Fire: The extraordinary story of Laki, the volcano that turned eighteenth-century Europe dark* (London: Profile Books)

Zinsser, William (ed.). 1987. *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company)