

CONTENTS

Introduction	
Island Zombie	1
<i>Pooling Waters</i>	
Making Being Here Enough	11
Sometimes Dead	13
The Cold Blood of Iceland	15
Bluff and Psycho	17
How—Is Visible Here	19
Floating in the Desert	23
Accidents Are Mundane	25
Roads Lack Dedication	27
Little Showers	29
Falling Trees Make Sound	31
Verne's Journey	33
The Probability of Round Rocks	35
Special Effects	37
Lóa and Lóa	39
Weather Is National Sport	41
Anatomy and Geography	43
Indoor Water	45
Pronouns Detain Me	47
Bluff Life	49
A Newark Here	53
Island and Labyrinth	55
Where the Earth Is Hot	57
Youth and Geometry	59
Sleep: Rotation Method	63
When Dickinson Shut Her Eyes	65
Pastoral and Cave	67
The Flats (After William Morris)	69
Crossing a Field I Remember	71
I Can't See the Arctic Circle from Here	73
A Franchise of Rainbows	75
Wallace Stevens's Ice	77

Collected

Hot Water Sampler	85
An Adhesive Feeling	89
A Mink Look	91
Mirror, Desert and Mirror	93
Monroe, Iceland	97
Throwing Itself Together	99
Something Shimmering	101
An Evening with Gelatinous and Glutinous	103
Cloth-Home Culture	105
The Other Here	107
Water and Clearing (Excerpt)	109
Conjecture a Cause: Seljavegur 2, Reykjavík 101, August 22, 2003	111
Notes on the Obsolescence of Islands	115
Eruption, Assassination (November 1963)	119
A White Stone	121

My Oz	125
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Weather Reports You (Excerpt)

Introduction	135
Selection: 21 Reports	137

***Morgunblaðið* Newspaper**

<i>Note on Texts</i>	180
The Nothing That Is	181
Notes on Icelandic Architecture (Excerpt)	187
One Hundred Waterfalls, Five Hundred Jobs	189
<i>Iceland's Difference</i>	195

Colophon	246
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ISLAND ZOMBIE

1

My first venture abroad was Iceland. It was 1975 and I was nineteen. My memory of the trip is dominated by weather. The sky, the wind, and the light all made a strong impression. Weather simply hadn't occurred to me before then.

In 1978 I received a grant from graduate school. I used it to return to Iceland the following year. For six months I roamed the island. With a dirt bike modified for long distance travel, I was portable; I lived in a tent furnished with candles, sleeping bag, and cook stove, pitching camp wherever I tired.

It was a solitary journey. The roads were unpaved. The bike was well suited; with no limits on access, I went everywhere. The distinction between public and private hardly existed then, and never restricted direction. Anywhere was possible.

Except for short interludes, I was outside 24/7, exposed to the inclement weather, the riotous force of the wind, and the loud whining of the two-stroke engine. The roads, not fit for distance, made travel demanding and slow. That spring and summer, the seasons of my journey, were claimed as the coldest and wettest in the island's recorded meteorological history. With no grading the dirt roads hugged the natural contour of the landscape. The local ups and downs greatly slowed horizontal progress. With distance attenuated in this manner, arrival lingered endlessly off in the distance.

I returned to Iceland with migratory insistence and regularity. The necessity of it was part of me. Iceland was the only place I went without cause, just to be there.

Early on I imagined compiling an inventory of rocks and geologic debris. Each rock was that compelling. Travel was crowded with attention-grabbing views

and weird organic formations. To date there is no inventory, only the dream, though I remember them. I remember the rocks.

In 1982 the national chief of lighthouse keepers gave me permission to stay in a lighthouse off the southern coast. For six weeks I lived up on the bluff at Dyrhólaey. The building, from the early part of the twentieth century, included living quarters. But when the light was automated the lighthouse went uninhabited for decades.

I arrived in early May. And since I wasn't going anywhere, it soon began to feel like an act of submergence—going deep but not going far. Staying put among local change was travel. The bluff was action packed. It was a matter of attention. Between the water and the light, the birdsong and the wind, the rocks and the weather. Between the sand and the seals and the eider and the puffin, I was busy.

In the mid-1980s I began work on *To Place*: a series of books—an encyclopedia of sorts, based in what would become a lifelong relationship to the island. The first volume, *Bluff Life*, was published in 1990. Currently it is ten volumes deep.* I'm not anticipating an end to it since I've discovered, paradoxically, that *To Place* becomes less complete with each new volume.

By the early 1990s Iceland had become quarry and source. At times travel seemed closer to hunting or mining. Extraction, I thought, was the basic act. The drawings, sculpture, and photographic work I was producing at the time[†] integrated the presence of the island and the experience it offered. But as I view the dynamic now, the reality was quite different: Iceland was a force, a force that had taken possession of me.

2

I recall the first image I associated with Iceland from childhood. It was that of a horizonless ocean at the center of the earth. I knew it was Iceland because Jules Verne had decided, discovered, or determined that the *entrance to the center of the earth* was located there. With all the years and all my travels, the truth of this insight has only deepened.

I'm often asked but have no idea why I chose Iceland, why I first started going, why I still go. In truth I believe Iceland chose me:

The island.
The ocean surround.
The going north.
The light.

The emptiness.

The full-up vacancy.

The wholeness.

The absence of parts.

The wholeness of something entire.

The completeness of something whole.

The frequency of white.

The whiteness of white.

The open space.

The nothing of open space.

The accumulation of nothing.

The nothing plus nothing that is still nothing.

The nothing plus nothing that is still transparent.

The horizon.

The horizon that always exaggerates the proximity of the horizon.[‡]

The possibility of infinity.

The visibility of infinity.

The visibility of the weather.

The visibility of other worlds.

The sense of seeing beyond sight.

The plain circumstance.

The now.

The perpetual now.

The unsuspendable now.

The no-other-than-now.

The treelessness.

The treelessness that provokes no desire for trees.

The views.

The views in the scale of the planet.

The openness.

The continuity.

The fool-me-endlessness.

The being faraway.

The feeling of being surrounded by faraway.

The sense of place.

The palpable sense of place.

The with-my-eyes-closed-sense of place.

The possibility of being present.

The sense of being present.

The being present.

The unsolicited awareness.

The ineluctable awareness.

The sheer awareness.

The solitude.

The solitude of distance.

The solitude of only.

The solitude of no way back.

The cool air.

The cold air.

The nothing but air air.

The air that is spirit not thing.

The wild, wild air.

The largeness of the moon.

The closeness of celestial bodies.

The light from non-terrestrial sources.

The shadows.

The darkness of shade.

The darkness of light withdrawn.

The black earth.

The black sand and the black ash and the black rocks.

The pink pumice.

The unnatural looking natural red earth.

The rocks.

The rocks shaped to platonic stardom.

The rocks in their organic ambiguity.

The basalt everywhere.

The basalt with its liquid past.

The basalt: cool and cracked, and whole even when in pieces.

The erratics.

The always solitary erratics.

The desert.

The unbroken emptiness of the desert.

The not nothing of the desert.

The absence of threat.

The absence of threat.

The mystery.

The mystery that is chaperone.

The mystery that accompanies the light: dark and bright.

The wind.

The delicacy and violence of the wind.

The indifference of the wind.

The stillness when it is still.

The silence when it is still.

The weather that is wildlife.

The weather.

The weather—sublime and dangerous, wild and unknowable.

The simplicity.

The clarity.

The youth.

The chance.

The opportunity.

The desire.

The absence of the hidden.

The absence of secrets?

The feeling of the absence of secrets.

The unused.

The unoccupied.

The uninhabited.

The absence of hierarchy.

The transparence of time and space.

The transparence of place.

The crazy infant geology.

The unworn and the broken and the always complete geology.

The self-evident geology.

The water.

The water.

The water.



Q.—*What is a soul possessed by isolated insentient forces?*

A.—*An island zombie?*

(2020)

* Vol. 2: *Folds* (1991); Vol. 3: *Lava* (1992); Vol. 4: *Pooling Waters* (1994); Vol. 5: *Verné's Journey* (1995); Vol. 6: *Haraldsdóttir* (1996); Vol. 7: *Arctic Circles* (1998); Vol. 8: *Becoming a Landscape* (2001); Vol. 9: *Doubt Box* (2006); Vol. 10: *Haraldsdóttir, Part Two* (2011).

† The photographic installations: *You Are the Weather* (1994); *Dead Owl* (1997); *bird* (1998–2008); *Pi* (1998); *Becoming a Landscape* (1999–2001); *Her, Her, Her, and Her* (2002); *Doubt by Water* (2003); *Herdubreid at Home* (2007); *You Are the Weather, Part 2* (2010); *Mother, Wonder* (2012/19).

‡ Paraphrase of Edmond Jabès.