

## An Other Competence: Iceland and Photography

We took a week-long trip to Iceland in March, 2018. We'd both been meaning to visit for several years, though I can't remember why I first decided that I wanted to. I think it had something to do with going north – further north than I had been before, at least – and something else to do with going to a country where the snow felt less ephemeral, an enduring part of the landscape as opposed to just a covering. I'd also likely looked at photographs of Iceland on the Internet – volcanic, glacial and alien – deciding, as is so often the case with tourism, that I wanted to see what I was seeing in the photos for myself.

Iceland is difficult to describe. Looking back over my notes, there are paragraphs and paragraphs of uncertainty, of trying to force the landscape into words, constantly revising and reshaping what I've written, grasping for an out-of-reach vocabulary, each sentence amending or expanding on the last. More often than any other adjective – and really much, much more – I use *strange*, pitifully vague and non-specific, a word whose meaning, though essentially fixed, is always making slight, minute adjustments to itself, like someone shifting their weight from one foot to the other. *Strange* is *unknown*, *unfamiliar*, and *of or belonging to another country*, but it is also *alien*, *abnormal* and – perhaps most fittingly for me – that which is *difficult to take in or account for*.

William Morris travelled to Iceland for three months in the summer of 1871. He kept a journal of his time there, which he refused to publish during his lifetime. It appeared in 1911 as volume eight of his *Collected Works*, edited by his youngest daughter, May. Reading through the journal, I realized Morris seems often to run into the same problem as me, of finding the words to describe what he's seeing. His descriptive sentences are long, stretching though semi-colon after semi-colon as he tries to render Iceland's landscape accurately on the page. Take his first glimpse of the island, from the deck of the *Diana*:

a terrible shore indeed: a great mass of dark grey mountains worked into pyramids and shelves, looking as if they had been built and half ruined; they were striped with snow high up, and wreaths of cloud dragged across them here and there, and above them were two peaks and a jagged ridge of pure white snow...

...the mountains look as if they rose straight out of the sea: they are all dark grey, turning indigo in the distance under the half-cloudy sky; but here and there the top of a conical peak will be burned red with the fire, or a snow-covered peak will rise up: at last we see the first of the great glaciers that looks as if it were running into the sea...

Like the island he's approaching, Morris's description appears "built and half ruined". Images are left abandoned as he catches sight of other details, his eyesight darting "here and there", trying to take it all in, to get it all down, the whole description caught between construction and erosion: mountains rise out of the sea as glaciers run into it; rocky peaks reach skyward only to be "burned red with [...] fire"; the "pyramids" refer us to a group of structures both magnificent and long-decayed. It is a landscape he continues to find difficult to grasp. For Lavinia Greenlaw, the journals are filled with "confident perceptions open to instant revision," recording Morris's experience of the landscape in real-time, a kind of sketch, "so what we get is description in action". Time and again for Morris, Iceland isn't *strange*, but *awful*; *monstrous* and *sublimely majestic*, causing *dread*, *profound respect*, and *reverential fear*.

At one point in my notes I make a comment on photography. It's the same idea, about Iceland being difficult to capture, how none of the pictures I've taken seem to "do justice" to the thing itself, that some quality of the landscape appears to have been lost. It's a thought I know I've had before, as I'm sure everyone has, a sense that the photographed place, person, event or thing didn't really look like that, suddenly doubting the photograph's ability to show things as they really were. In some sense this is common to all photography, which involves an inherent disconnect between the photograph and the photographed, a disconnect made all the more apparent by the display screens on most DSLR cameras like the one I was using (and, of course, on every camera phone), which enable you to view the photograph and photographed at near-enough the same time. But there's something about Iceland that makes this quality more felt. As with the difficulty of putting the landscape into words, there's something about it that seems particularly ungraspable.

This isn't to say that Iceland is impossible to photograph. In fact, it's sometimes hard to work out how you'd take a "bad" picture of Iceland, as if something would have to go extremely wrong, like a technical malfunction, to end up with an album full of duds. But I'm hesitant to call the country photogenic – a word which implies that something is enhanced by being

photographed – because I seem to think the opposite: that however good the photos are, however enticing or dramatic, seductive or compelling, I can't help feeling they are un-like how the country felt.

"[W]hile recording what has been seen," writes John Berger in *How to Understand a Photograph* (1967), "[a photograph] always and by its nature refers to what is not seen. It isolates, preserves and presents a moment taken from a continuum". Later, in the same book, he returns to this idea:

All photographs are ambiguous. All photographs have been taken out of a continuity. If the event is a public event, this continuity is history; if it is personal, the continuity, which has been broken, is a life story. Even a pure landscape breaks a continuity: that of the light and the weather. Discontinuity always produces ambiguity.

Part of the reason Iceland is so difficult to photograph, I think, is not just that pictures always "break a continuity", but that Iceland is forever breaking continuity with itself – the weather, the light, the landscape, the sky – refusing to stay fixed, producing endless variations that result in a kind of constant, even restless ambiguity. Here's another passage from Morris, making his way north:

At last we turn the corner of a big black sandhill, and are off the stones on to sand thickly besprinkled with flowers, then these presently disappear, and we ride under the sandhills over smooth black sand, that stretches far into the distance, getting quite purple at last, till a low bank of sand along a stream side stops it: in which bank is suddenly a scarped place which is deep Indian red. Past the sandhills we get into lava again but of the solid manageable kind: the weather has cleared by now, and we are coming near our supper and our bed, and at last can see a patch of green on a little slope which is verily lit.

Wildflowers appear and disappear in the same breath; the black sand turns to purple, then to "Indian red" before we reach, eventually, "a patch of green"; the land beneath erodes from stone to sand then hardens again to lava fields, though Morris makes sure to distinguish this as lava "of the solid manageable kind". And all the while the weather has been changing, too, slowly, such that Morris only notices "by now" that it has cleared. It's a landscape that refuses to stay still, but whose changes are so minor as to nearly go unregistered. Of course, to an extent, this idea of discontinuity is true of all landscapes, unfolding in distance and time: just think of travelling anywhere by train. But in Iceland the principle of discontinuity feels somehow more inherent, a feature not a texture.

The American artist and writer Roni Horn visited Iceland for the first time in 1975, a little over a century after Morris. It's possible that she's photographed the country more than anybody else, having migrated back and forth between the island and her native New York for over forty years. In 1994, she produced the first book in her ongoing series, *To Place*, which currently stands at nine volumes, an encyclopaedic, devotional assemblage of photographs, drawings, texts, and other media, a flickering archive which, like the country at its centre, refuses to stay fixed, each new book shifting in a slightly new direction. But it took Horn a decade to get used to taking photographs. "After a few days," she says, "I tried to take a photograph. But with my attempt to distinguish the first shot, the place disappeared on me":

It took months just to get past this veneer of sensationalism and picture-postcard possibilities [...] I put my equipment in a locker in the bus station in Reykjavik and took off for four months. This was in 1979. It really wasn't until 1988 that I again ventured out in earnest with a camera in Iceland.

Horn acknowledges Iceland's "picture-postcard possibilities" while at the same time sensing something harder to pin down. I'm compelled, as she describes it, by Iceland's disappearing act, the way the landscape seems to change "as if by magic" (Morris again, on his first ride out of Reykjavik), which she attributes (at least in part) to the country's fundamental nature as an island that is still being made and unmade by volatile elemental forces. "Natural forces gather there in a self-evident fashion," she says: "The how of everything is, simply put, visible. Iceland is so young that the forces of entropy have not yet eroded the island's geologic origins": "Iceland is always becoming what it will be, and what it will be is not a fixed thing either".

Because photographs fix, because they isolate a moment from its continuum, they necessarily fail to capture what Horn calls "the intensely physical nature of experience" in Iceland, the always becoming of an island that continues to be shaped. But I think this is precisely what Horn's ongoing series emphasizes. In some sense, with each new publication of *To Place* she reveals the inherent impossibility of her project. "I haven't arrived at totality yet," she says, "but that wouldn't be possible for me anyway. It contradicts my understanding of a place". It's as if a true photographic representation of



Iceland – one which managed to depict the minute changes of the weather, light and landscape – would resemble the impossible catalogues and documents of a Borges story, expanding outwards to the infinite. When asked if there are plans for further volumes of *To Place*, Horn's answer resounds: "Quite possibly there will always be".

Iceland's emergence as an increasingly popular tourist destination began in the mid-nineteenth-century and, as early as the 1860s, it began to lend its landscape to photography. In 1866, having spent a decade studying abroad, a young Icelander named Sigfús Eymundsson returned to Reykjavík, establishing a photography studio that would remain open until two years before his death in 1911, the same year Morris's Icelandic journals first appeared in print. The National Museum of Iceland houses more than 14,000 original plates and copies from Eymundsson's collection: the majority are studio portraits, though 830 of the photographs are taken outside; around a quarter of these are formal studies of Iceland's natural scenery, making Eymundsson the country's first landscape photographer. His longstanding project – "to publish a series of folios entitled 'Ísland í myndum' (Iceland in pictures) featuring a selection of his outdoor photographs," accompanied by explanatory notes in Icelandic, French, and English – stands as a long-distanced ancestor to Horn's, though only one of an envisaged four volumes of Eymundsson photographs appeared, published by the Tourist Information Society of Iceland in 1896. Eymundsson's devotion to the project is touching, betraying an honest and genuine enthusiasm for bringing Iceland's landscapes to cultural prominence, regularly displaying his photographs in Reykjavík and sending selections of his work to be exhibited in Copenhagen, Paris and Scotland.

By the time Morris arrived in 1871, notes Lavinia Greenlaw, "Iceland was already something of a tourist destination". Stopping at Geysir, Morris throws a kind of tantrum, frustrated by "the only nasty bit of camping ground we have had yet [...] a nasty, lumpy thin piece of turf, all scored with trenches cut by former tourists round their tents [...] all bestrewn with feathers and wings of birds, polished mutton bones, and above all pieces of paper." "Why, I am not going to camp here," he says to Eyvindr, an Icelander accompanying his group:

'You must,' said Eyvindr, 'All Englishmen do.'  
'Blast all Englishmen!' said I in the Icelandic tongue.

Arriving into Þingvellir for the first time a month later, Morris encounters a photographer himself. Alas, it isn't Eymundsson, but instead "a hair-brained queer chap named Watts, who had a great turn for climbing everything, and who had possession of the church with his photographic gear." William Lord Watts was an English geologist and adventurer. In 1875 he published a book – *Snioland: Or Iceland, Its Jokulls and Fjalls* – which recounts a trip to Iceland the previous summer. The book contains twelve photographs, including a "View of Almannagjá" – one of Iceland's gigantic fissures, caused by the drifting-apart of the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates – with a caption claiming it has been taken "from [the] door of [the] Church at Thingvellir," though the Preface credits this picture to a "Rev. Martin Hart". Just as I was beginning to think that I had found a different Watts entirely, however, the opening sentences describe embarking on the *Diana* – the same ship Morris sailed to Iceland on – and trying "to find how many of the old faces I had become acquainted with in my former voyage of 1871". Watts doesn't mention meeting Morris, but he's there by proxy: the seventh photo in the book shows a group of six men, standing around a modest campsite – a canvas tent, a packed horse, some flecks of white among the grass that could be flowers, or even pieces of paper – "Encampment at Geysir (taken in 1871)". I can't help imagining Morris there, standing just a little out of shot.

On the whole, Eymundsson and Watts's photographs are fairly uniform, bisected along a horizontal plane dividing heavy rocks from cloudy sky, the occasional waterfall or stream (the running water is milky with overexposure, looking like negative space), a horse, or a sprinkling of buildings. Though they have their appeal as period curios, they're arguably more interesting as historical records than as aesthetic objects, preserving the Iceland of the 1860s and 70s, a landscape long-since altered. A trip to the website of the Icelandic Met Office will tell you that there have been forty-two volcanic eruptions since 1902: Iceland is always becoming what it will be, and what it will be is not a fixed thing either. Surtsey, an island off the southern coast, was formed in 1963 in an eruption lasting nearly half a decade.

In Stykkishólmur, a small town on the north coast of the Snaefellsnes peninsula, a few hours' drive from Reykjavík, is the Library of Water, Roni Horn's curved-glass-fronted, meditative space, part observatory, part art installation, containing twenty-four cylindrical glass columns, running floor to ceiling, each filled with ice-melt collected from the different sites of Iceland's major glaciers. Taken one way, the Library of Water is a future museum, holding within it a pressing comment about global warming, but it is

also a kind of photograph, preserving a trace of the landscape already undergoing change. The forest of glass columns, set within a glass atrium, works to exaggerate the changes in the weather, light and land, the "instability" of Iceland, as art historian Briony Fer has called it: "The fact of water in different states – the fact that this glacial water has melted – makes this instability yet more insistent. Even the landscape outside seems in this state of flux between liquidity and solidity". As with Horn's series of books, there's a devotional aspect to the Library of Water. It's like a reliquary, or a kind of shrine. Looking at pictures of it on the Internet, I'm reminded of Philip Larkin's poem 'Water':

If I were called in  
To construct a religion  
I should make use of water

[...]

And I should raise in the east  
A glass of water  
Where any-angled light  
Would congregate endlessly.

I didn't find out about the Library of Water until we'd already left Stykkishólmur. I'd read about it several months before, however, without realizing, in a poem by Anne Carson:

I stand in another world.  
Not the past not the future.  
Not paradise not reality not

a dream.  
An other competence.  
Wild and constant.

Carson spent a year in Stykkishólmur in 2009 as one of the Library's writers in residence. She seems to recognise the same "flux between liquidity and solidarity" as Briony Fer, the wildness and constancy of endlessly-congregating, any-angled light, an instability the poem extends to the environment beyond the glass.

Instability is what makes Iceland difficult to represent. So often in my notes I find that my eyesight has somehow failed, as if the weather, light and distance have conspired to play a trick on me. Looking back over Morris's journal, the same keeps happening to him: at Geysir, the water is "so clear that in the twilight I couldn't see that there was any water there"; a few weeks later, the sun descending on the sea creates a gleam so bright "that it was long before I was fairly sure that it was not a strip of brightest sky beneath the cloud"; after dinner a week later, "looking up at the black mountains opposite, [I] thought the moon lay on them brightly high up, and found presently that it was snow that had fallen since we came in".

Rebecca Solnit, who held the residency in Stykkishólmur in 2008, experiences a similar mis-seeing, which she writes about in *The Faraway Nearby* (2013). Gazing across at a mountain on the island of Klakkeyjar, a few kilometres from the Library of Water, she describes the peak as looking "like a pyramid," just as Morris describes the mountains he can see from the *Diana*. Taking a boat out into the archipelago, however, she watches as "the pyramid became two pyramids like a pair of breasts jutting up out of the sea," startled to realize "that what I had seen for a month as one peak had always been two." This topographical and meteorological shiftiness, for Solnit, is typical of Iceland, a country home to "forces that will flourish no matter what goes extinct," forces that will continue to determine the landscape even when we fail to notice them, a process of endless making and remaking "that existed before life and will exist after us".

Iceland is a country that bears returning to, as Morris did, as Watts did, and as Horn has done for nearly half a century. Becky and I discussed a few times how it would be to come back at a different time of year, repeating the exact same route, in order to see the country in a different season, a different state, or just a different kind of light. We left on a delayed evening flight from Reykjavík to London. Looking over at Lavinia Greenlaw's notes a final time, her facing-page commentary which rides alongside Morris's prose, there's a line I can't help reading photographically. Opposite Morris's entry for 31st August, 1871, as he's waiting to board the *Diana* and begin his journey home, Greenlaw asks: *What are you taking and what are you leaving behind?* Whatever we had taken, whatever we would end up taking home, we were leaving behind the part of Iceland that refuses to be fixed – on paper, on film, or even really in memory – an ever-shifting geography, a terrible shore indeed.