

# I

## HOTEL CALIFORNIA, NY-ÅLESUND



Hotel California, Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard, 1982. Photograph: Tim Richards

Dear Dan Richards,

your travels will not be easy, but I think you have a fascinating project in the making . . . I wish you all the best, in particular in the Svalbard archipelago.

Best,

Werner Herzog<sup>1</sup>

## OUTPOST

I grew up fascinated by the polar bear pelvis in my father's study.

My mother, Annie, tells me that when my father, Tim, returned from his final Arctic expedition, a month before my birth, it was night and raining hard. From Svalbard he'd flown down to Tromsø, then Luton, caught several trains to reach Swansea and finally a bus to Penclawdd – a village on the Gower where my parents lived. Annie had sat by the window all evening, waiting, and now she could see him walking up the shining road, pack on his back. She was listening to Gladys Knight & the Pips, a cassette. Once home he was amazed to see how pregnant Annie was, how round her belly. He was also very taken with the carpet, Annie remembers – it felt so good on his tired feet.

Tim had been away for several months on Svalbard – a Norwegian archipelago in the Arctic Ocean, situated north of mainland Europe, about halfway between continental Norway and the North Pole – exploring the Brøgger peninsula and the glaciers, fjords and mountains east of Ny-Ålesund, the northernmost civilian functional settlement at 78° 55' N.

Next morning he unpacked his bag. Everything smelled of smoke. The smell permeated the whole house – Trangia smoke and unwashed man – and from deep in the stuffed mix of wool and down he drew out the pelvis, abstract, sculptural, bleached, and placed it on the table. Strange object from another world.

Years later, he told me that he'd found the bony frame on the ice and glaciers of Kongsfjorden although, as time passed, the story changed and he'd swapped it for cake and kit with the expedition doctor. The pelvis lived in the study of our

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Polar bear pelvis, Bath, 2016. Photograph: Dan Richards

various houses throughout my childhood; less trophy, more alien artefact. It looked so pure, supernaturally white. When held it was heavier than one might expect. It enthralled me; an almost feathered line of peaks ran over the sacrum and coccyx, the broken ends of the flaring hips revealed a coral interior. The hollow eyes of the femur cups, the sinuous lines of the iliac crest, its conch shell-like fissures, cracks and apertures – all these tactile features thrilled and intrigued. The idea of my father having discovered it on a glacier – an

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impossibly far-flung landscape of mythical beasts – caught my imagination. And the names! Ny-Ålesund: I rolled the word round like a marble in my mouth; Svalbard: it sounded so cold; and Spitsbergen: somehow colder still.\*

The pelvis was full of story. To hold it was to think of Tim as a young man in that great white silence, imagine polar bears, the life of that particular bear, and feel my horizons expand.

There's a photograph of Tim on his expedition. In it, he stands with four others outside the front door of a small wooden shed. A sixth, unseen behind the camera, takes the shot. Everyone smiles. Behind and around them stretch moonland cliffs and dunes. On the back of the photograph is written *Hotel California, Ny-Ålesund*. Tim, dressed in a wool hat and striped jumper, dark trousers and big boots, stands holding two pans. At his elbow, leant against the shed, is a long black rifle, for bears. Or rather, *in case of bears . . .* He was the expedition marksman and took a shooting course before the party left England but never fired a shot, he reassured me.

They never met a bear.

Which is lucky, because Hotel California doesn't look like it would stand up to a bear.† An unremarkable garden shed, the only thing that makes it a shed of note is the fact it's there, stood on Svalbard. Once you notice the shed, the sheer blunt ordinary shed-ness of the shed, it's hard to see anything else. It has the sheepish air of a shed out of place,

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\* Prior to 1925 Svalbard was known by its Dutch name, Spitsbergen – still the name of its largest island.

† It is sobering to remember of polar bears that, as Peter Cook once observed, *strictly speaking, they're not vegetarians.*

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a lost shed stumbled into a shot. The idea of six people sleeping inside it seems implausible and rather eccentric. Yet they gave it a name and called it home and there they are, Tim's party, stood beaming outside their shed, an incongruous cabin at the top of the world.

What has become of that shed? As time went on it became inseparable from the pelvis in my imagination, part of an Arctic triptych – my father, the pelvis, the shed. It stood clear of the *mêlée* of his recollections. The anecdotes about his team being buzzed by Ranulph Fiennes's spotter plane,<sup>7</sup> climbing mountains, an incident with a boat full of advocaat, sleeping out in the midnight sun, keeping watch for bears, receiving a care package from Annie – fruitcake and tea wrapped in newspapers posted up to the world's northernmost post office – all these recollections subtly shifted and changed as the years went on but the fact(s) Tim went to Svalbard, stayed in a shed and brought home a polar bear pelvis remained solid.

I'd read that in recent years, due to melting permafrost, wooden buildings in the far north have begun to thaw and rot for the first time. Has the shed gone the way of that bear on the ice – fallen down, picked apart, disappeared? At some point I decided to go and discover for myself.

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\* Between 1979 and 1982 Ranulph Fiennes, Charles R. Burton and Oliver Shepard attempted to journey around the world on its polar axis using only surface transport – land, sea, ice – in a quest named the Transglobe Expedition. Part of the trip involved negotiating the Northwest Passage in an open boat, to which end they employed a spotter plane to look for clear water. In the periods between surveying the ice the plane crew seem to have taken great pleasure in making low-level passes over Tim's expedition, *North by Northwest*-style.

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During the course of climbing and researching my last book, *Climbing Days*, I stayed in a number of high mountain huts. Some were new and state of the art, some, like the Bertol Hut above Arolla in Switzerland, had been rebuilt on the site of earlier sheds, and some stood apparently unchanged since my great-great-aunt and uncle, Dorothea and Ivor, were mountaineering in the 1920s and 30s.

I found such cabins, often perched on the edge of sharp landscapes, to be a set of secret worlds. These were slightly arcane altitudinous hostels full of enthusiasts and eccentrics – the deeply-tanned leathery fellow in his seventies who took me through his idiosyncratic lethal-looking gear one breakfast, explaining each gizmo and tool in turn with obvious pride and glee; the Swiss guardians who sat in crow's-nest judgement – their duties of care and hospitality tempered by the immediate assessment of the shape and possible liability of everybody who crossed their threshold.

This was a very different setup from the unmanned refuges I'd encountered in Snowdonia and the Lake District – bothy *Marie Celestes* which I always found empty of people but full of their traces – chairs pushed back in the act of leaving, scuff marks on the floor, faint cooking smells . . . The interior lives of these austere short-stay cells put me in mind of Philip Larkin's poem 'Home is so sad':

It stays as it was left,  
Shaped to the comfort of the last to go  
As if to win them back.<sup>2</sup>

When Dorothea and Ivor stayed in the Bertol Hut it was little more than a wooden Wendy house set up on a crest

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of rock overlooking the Mont Miné Glacier. Dorothea captioned a photograph of it in her memoir as '*The Bertol Hut (11,155 ft.) perched like a medieval castle*'<sup>3</sup>

I'm not sure it ever looked like a medieval castle. Examining the picture again it looks another case of a bewildered shed dragooned into service. '*Adjoining potting sheds on a silver rock mohawk*' might have been a better caption, although 'perched' is exactly right.

Today, the sheds are gone, replaced with a multi-storey insulated concrete bunk-fort. Now Bertol looks like a castle or, rather, the sort of monstrous research station inhabited by scientists at the poles. Run as a business, it is staffed half the year, sleeping eighty on four levels in five dormitories of sixteen beds equipped with 'duvets Nordic' and has a panoramic dining room. Things have changed.

Back in the early twentieth century Bertol had no guardian. Like Tim's Svalbard hut, it stood empty and unmanned, without running water; an off-grid refuge containing emergency food supplies. Every September, once the staff have departed, locking their quarters and kitchen behind them, Bertol reverts back to its essential spartan state known in German as *Biwakschachtel* or *Bivouac*.

*Bivouac* means different things in different countries. To the English it carries an elemental improvised quality: '*n.* the resting at night of soldiers (or others) in the open air, instead of under cover in camp. – *v.i.* to pass a night in the open air.' In Switzerland, Germany and many Nordic countries, however, bivouac refers to a more substantial built refuge. So, whilst my father and I might optimistically refer to the night we spent on the side of Dent Blanche as *bivouacking*, the Swiss would say that we just sat down. Indeed I discovered

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first hand that they have no special name or term for this beyond ‘stopped due to fatigue and incompetence.’

It would be wrong, however, to see these structures as escape pods alone; panic rooms for the injured or unprepared. Very few buildings in wilderness are designed as places to stop, recover, then phone a helicopter out – although they can fulfil this role in an emergency. Rather, they are often places of respite enabling one to keep going under one’s own steam, part of a bigger picture instead of ends in themselves. I think the likes of Hotel California on Svalbard and the Bertol Hut in Switzerland are best understood as staging posts. Perhaps the gift such buildings really endow, their highest and ultimate function, is to allow mankind a foothold in otherwise inhospitable terrain.

‘No man should go through life without once experiencing healthy, even bored solitude in the wilderness,’ wrote Jack Kerouac of his time as a wildfire-spotter on Desolation Peak, ‘finding himself depending solely on himself and thereby learning his true and hidden strength.’<sup>4</sup>

Human shelters in the wilderness are – perhaps ironically – necessary for this kind of immersion. Here is Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in *Wind, Sand and Stars*, describing Port-Étienne<sup>†</sup> on the edge of the then unconquered territories:

[It] could not be called a town. There is a fort, a hangar, and a wooden hut for our crews. Surrounded by absolute

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\* As a chastening case in point, the Bivouac of the Dent Blanche is an actual hut which sits below the north ridge, a stone-built beehive cell that can sleep fifteen and ‘contains blankets, mattresses, pillows, utensils and basic cutlery’.

† Port-Étienne is now called Nouadhibou, Islamic Republic of Mauritania, North Africa.



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desert, it is practically invincible in spite of its feeble military resources . . . There is no enemy to fight but silence, in the destitution that is our chief protection. And Lucas, the airfield manager, winds his gramophone night and day; so remote from life, it speaks to us in some half-forgotten language, awakening an undefined melancholy which is strangely like thirst.<sup>5</sup>

So remote from life, yet there it is, winding a gramophone night and day . . . the hangar and runway, the lighthouse, the farmstead, the shed: such infrastructure animates the otherwise intractable scape around it with the possibility of discovery, onward travel, or stasis. Each building is a stone dropped from whence ripples spread.

Saint-Exupéry is unequivocal later in the same book that the distance, silence and isolation afforded by time spent in wilderness are a chastening reminder of humanity's place in the grandest scheme. Psychologists have studied this so-called 'overview effect', a cognitive shift following an experience of true awe, and measured its impact on human subjects. It turned out to be transformational. The subjects returned more patient, less materialistic, and more willing to help others.

Anousheh Ansari, the first private female cosmonaut, has said she believes that world leaders should be taken on a spaceflight to experience what she saw and felt. Were this to happen, Ansari contends, they would see the world in a very different light and enact very different policies.

For better or worse *homo sapiens* are a questing, consuming, destructive species. We have now entered the age of Anthropocene – humans are ruining the planet. It might be better for the Earth if we stopped exploring, lest the human

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litter which now blights the top of Everest and the depths of the sea spread to every part of the world. Or perhaps the wonders of the natural world can yet inspire us to change, and the ‘overview effect’ can make guardians of consumers. I believe the more we know about our world, the more we see, the more deeply we engage with it, understand its nature, the more likely we are to be good custodians and reverse our most selfish destructive behaviour.



‘An amazing thunderstorm last night as I lay listening. Like being inside a kettledrum with a whole symphony going on out there and with thunder in wraparound quadraphonic!’ wrote Roger Deakin of a night spent out in the railway wagon where he sometimes wrote and often slept in the grounds of his home, Walnut Tree Farm.<sup>6</sup>

Over the years, as well as the railway wagon, Deakin established a variety of outlying structures, including two shepherd’s huts, and an old wooden caravan with a cracked window. Robert Macfarlane has suggested that Deakin was a latter-day Thoreau and, indeed, there seems a strong correlation between writing and refuge dwelling. I don’t think it a coincidence that concerted focused work and musical practice is sometimes referred to as ‘woodshedding’.

Perhaps a case can also be made for bothy-like sheds with feral animating energy emanating as much from within as without: ascetic creative crucibles.

Ever since Henry David Thoreau described his two years, two months, and two days of cabin life at Walden Pond, Massachusetts, the idea seems to have percolated, stirred and

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seduced the modern psyche. To dwell within such a place, even for a short space of time, seems to confer a touch of aesthete mysticism, pioneer heroism or, at least, *Boys' Own* derring-do – an uncommon intimacy with nature, embodied so brilliantly by Deakin.

Roald Dahl had a writing cabin in the garden of his home in Great Missenden. Dylan Thomas had a shed above his house in Laugharne – ‘my word-splashed hut’ – a replica of which toured the UK in 2014 to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the poet’s birth. George Bernard Shaw worked for the last twenty years of his life in a remarkably sophisticated writer’s hut in the grounds of his property at Ayot St Lawrence, Hertfordshire, built on a turntable so that it could be rotated to follow the sun.

‘To write well is to think clearly. That’s why it’s so hard,’<sup>7</sup> wrote David McCullough, and this seems to me to be at the heart of the cabin’s appeal to writers and artists, independent of its practical origins and virtues; it is a cerebral clearing-house. I see a line and lineage running back through Deakin, Dahl, Thomas, Woolf, Shaw and Yeats to Thoreau. Yeats’s wish to rise and go to his Lake Isle and build a small cabin of clay and wattles, the better to work and think, epitomises the siren call such spaces seem to sound in creative minds.

There’s something undeniably romantic and transcendental about the idea of living and writing in such proximity to the natural world – a thought exemplified by the intimacy of Thoreau’s description of his house at Walden Pond:

This frame, so slightly clad, was a sort of crystallization around me, and reacted on the builder. It was suggestive

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somewhat as a picture in outlines. I did not need to go outdoors to take the air, for the atmosphere within had lost none of its freshness. It was not so much within doors as behind a door where I sat, even in the rainiest weather . . . I found myself suddenly neighbor to the birds; not by having imprisoned one, but having caged myself near them. I was not only nearer to some of those which commonly frequent the garden and the orchard, but to those smaller and more thrilling songsters of the forest which never, or rarely, serenade a villager – the wood thrush, the veery, the scarlet tanager, the field sparrow, the whip-poor-will, and many others.<sup>8</sup>

I once sat for an hour in a shelter resembling an upturned coracle built by land artist David Nash in the four woodland acres where his magical *Ash Dome* lives. The day was clear and a brisk wind mused the trees so the dappled light shimmied around me. It became so brilliantly obvious that here was a space to clear one's mind and think, invent, imagine – *'the still point of the turning world . . . at the still point, there the dance is'*?



This book considers the romantic, exploratory appeal of cabins and isolated stations; utilitarian constructions, pared-back buildings of essential first principles. Astringent architecture attracts me because it seems to represent a longed-for clarity, and in the pages that follow I will examine the importance of dens and eeries as creative spaces – cells containing just enough domestic comfort to allow a person

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to work, whilst eschewing the usual barriers to the outside world. But outposts are many and various, an idiosyncratic lot, so whilst some may be low-tech interzones made of just enough architecture to keep out the weather like Thoreau's Walden cabin, others will be more robust. Old and new, restored, repurposed; the solid, the decrepit and the brilliantly bizarre. Some will not seem to conform to the outline I've laid out here at all – *Shedboatshead* and *Nageire-dō* might leave some scratching their heads – but I hope you'll forgive and perhaps join me in celebrating any such apparently aberrant and eccentric detours along the way. I hope you'll be delighted and seduced by such marvels as the belvederes atop Desolation Peak and Phare de Cordouan. This book is not designed to be a definitive tour but rather an odyssey inspired by the world of possibilities and wonder embodied by a polar bear pelvis brought home to South Wales one wet and blustery night.

Every chapter will explore a particular situation or structure, each location a stop in an ongoing narrative, each examining a different facet, perspective and approach to the experience of wilderness. I contend that bothies, depots, silos and beacons form the foundation of many great endeavours; rungs on the ladder, even into outer space.

If the question at the heart of my last book, *Climbing Days*, was 'Why climb mountains?', *Outpost* seeks answers to the question of what draws people to wilderness and the isolated human stations around and within them. What can such places tell us about the human condition? What compels us to go to the ends of the Earth, and what future do these places have?

## II

### SÆLUHÚS, ICELAND

I have come to the borders of sleep,  
The unfathomable deep  
Forest where all must lose  
Their way

– Edward Thomas<sup>1</sup>

In late 2016 I read *Questions of Travel: William Morris in Iceland*, Lavinia Greenlaw's selection from Morris's 1871 *Iceland Journal*, a book in which the author weaves Morris's descriptions of the Icelandic wilderness – 'most romantic of all deserts' – with her own shadow travelogue of journeys in his footsteps.

In the book's introduction Greenlaw writes that she didn't originally go to Iceland because of Morris but was rather drawn by a dreamlike sense of how the Iceland landscape *might* be:

I had seen it at the corner of the map and envisaged darkness and emptiness that would help me feel off the map altogether. My sense of what to expect was entirely abstract: a surface of calm and a depth of wildness, a combination of the vague and the absolute.<sup>2</sup>

I too had long been captivated by Iceland's otherworldly charisma. At school, inspired by landscapes of lava, tundra

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and glacier, I dreamt of visiting. I would search through old copies of *National Geographic* for pictures of the islands, and hunt through the library for atlases and books about it, together with its wingmen, Greenland and Svalbard. I found the high North's raw enormity compelling and would stare transfixed at any accounts and photographs I found, transported, always hoping for more. The idea of volcanos in a cold realm thrilled me – the impossible clash of ice and fire.

Later, my Icelandic enthusiasm was further kindled by the music of Múm, Björk and Sigur Rós, whose records came to embody aspects of the Icelandic landscape. Múm's tender glitchy organic music was synonymous with the recoveries from crushing university hangovers – muzzy, communal, celebratory and warm. Björk's world, on the other hand, was emotional and elemental, childlike, inquisitive and questing, each album oscillating between sensual intimacy and uncanny feral wildness. I found and continue to find her work euphoric, cinematic and sensationally *other*.

But perhaps Sigur Rós, most of all, opened up and revealed the landscape, people and sheer size of Iceland to me in their film *Heima*. The film documents a tour the band made around the island in June 2006, playing in ghost towns, outsider art shrines, national parks, cabins, small community halls, and an abandoned herring factory in Djúpvík, before reconvening in Reykjavik to play the largest gig in Icelandic history. The project was about connection and ideas of belonging, home and homeland. I was very taken with the archive footage of the steaming, teeming herring port in the far west of the country, now

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mouldering rusted and abandoned, reanimated and filled with people and music for a single day in celebration and remembrance.\*

With all this in mind, Iceland seemed the absolute place to begin my search for outposts and bivouacs.

As a first step, I emailed Dr Katrín Anna Lund, Associate Professor in the Department of Geography and Tourism at the University of Iceland, to ask about bothies unique and peculiar to the island. Katrín put me in touch with a couple of her colleagues who specialised in Icelandic geoscience and wilderness, and the question came back, was I aware of *sæluhús*?

## SÆLUHÚS

Iceland is almost exclusively inhabited around the coast, the interior hardly at all. The original *sæluhús* (*houses of joy*) were refuge stations for travellers crossing the hinter/highlands. The remains of many structures dating back to Viking times can still be found whilst others, frequented, repaired and rebuilt over the centuries, have become Ships of Theseus, renewed beyond recognition† – modern bunkhouses on ancient foundations.

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\* On the day of the 2017 summer solstice – shortly after my return from the island – Sigur Rós unveiled a twenty-four-hour ‘slow TV’ event live on Iceland’s national television station – also streamed live globally via YouTube. *Route One* features footage of a 1,332km journey around the whole of Iceland’s coastal ring road, set to a constantly evolving soundtrack based around elements of their latest song, ‘Óveður’.

† The Ship of Theseus, also known as Theseus’s Paradox, is a thought experiment which asks the question whether an object that has had all its components replaced remains fundamentally the same object. The paradox is recorded by the first-century writer Plutarch in *Life of Theseus*. Plutarch asked



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Sæluhús are opened up for the spring and summer hiking season and need to be booked in advance, but retain their original emergency shelter status in the closed season between October and May. The essential generosity of these structures, the ideas of renewal and sanctuary at their heart, appealed to me from the moment I learnt of their existence. I found the idea of cabins animated by joy delightful and immediately set out to find a sæluhús overseer.

Within a fortnight of first contacting Katrín, I was talking to Stefán Jökull Jakobsson, Head Ranger of Ferðafélag Íslands (the Iceland Touring Association, FÍ). A month later I was on a plane to Reykjavik.



I met Stefán at his Ferðafélag Íslands HQ. A tall bear-like man with a heavy-duty handshake, he made me a coffee and then led the way upstairs to a large office containing a desk, a phone and a noticeboard on which were pinned maps and photographs.

Such was the spartan nature of the room that I wondered for a moment if it might be a front and I was about to be sent on a secret mission – for the Icelandic Navy Sæluhús perhaps – but no, the office was bare because Stefán was so rarely there. His early summer days usually consist of criss-crossing Iceland in his 4×4 digging isolated huts out of snowdrifts, restocking gas bottles and emergency supplies,

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whether a ship that had been restored by replacing every single wooden part remained the same ship. *See also* – Trigger's broom.

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fixing infrastructure, supporting wardens and generally troubleshooting the sæluhús network.’

Stefán showed me numbered pictures of the sæluhús in his care, a charming, rather motley collection built to the specifications and whims of whoever took the job. They ranged from big timber barns to pyramidal sheds of a single room, corrugated dens on legs jostling with cricket pavilion-esque gazebos. Some of the largest look like solid schoolhouses, the smallest, modest beach huts, but all in the middle of nowhere – eccentric havens on tundric seas.

The mugshot of #34 showed a tiny shed akin to a boshed-together pigeon loft; the equivalent of a one-man tent in wood.

Ferðafélag Íslands oversee thirty-seven sæluhús scattered around Iceland, but mainly sited in the east and centre. The organisation’s mandate remains the same as when it was formed in 1927, to help people travel out from the towns and city into the landscape to see the natural wonders of Iceland. From the 30s on, cabins were built or rebuilt to make particular journeys possible – sæluhús #5–#9 chart a curve around the belly of the Langjökull glacier, for example, whilst #29–#34 allow long-distance trekking beyond the Vatnajökull icecap. ‘And there is the Laugavegur Trail,’ he smiled ruefully. ‘*The famous one.*’

A few months before my visit Bradt guides had released a new book raving about the Laugavegur Trail, enthusing about a ‘truly invigorating walk across primitive terrain’, and

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\* He also showed me photographs of huts that had been broken into during the off-season, ransacked and abandoned open to the elements, shaking his head in sad disbelief.

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Stefán was bracing for the impact because such fame and gushing press bring people, more people than Iceland could ever have imagined twenty years ago. ‘My job is to make sure the things the people come to see aren’t damaged by the people coming to see them,’ he explained, equating it to sticking a line of tape to a gallery floor in front of a painting. ‘I say, “*Here, look at this, isn’t it astonishing?*” And they look and maybe they take a photograph and then they move on down a path and enjoy themselves and look at the next amazing thing.’

His job is to be invisible, he says, to maintain cabins and build and repair paths that people don’t notice they’re walking; to guide people through a landscape so they have the best time possible and leave no trace. But it isn’t easy. In 2009, 464,000 tourists travelled to Iceland. At the time of my visit in 2016, that number had grown to almost 1.8 million and was accelerating. Interviewed in the *Financial Times*, Professor Edward Huijbens of the Icelandic Tourism Research Centre described the graph of tourist numbers as ‘currently almost vertical’. Visitors to Iceland for 2017 were expected to reach 2.4 million.<sup>3</sup>

Not all of those people make a beeline for a bunkhouse, but the numbers have hit Ferðafélag Íslands hard.

Once isolated, sæluhús often now sit amidst campsites catering for hundreds, such is the popularity and traffic of the trails strung between them. People’s expectations have changed since the mid-twentieth century when many of the cabins were built by local volunteers. Back then, the idea was to construct cheap utilitarian lodges to keep the elements at bay a few weekends a year for rambling Icelanders. Now the structures need constant upkeep

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because they're frail and exhausted, and the delicate wilderness around them is likewise at risk from pollution and over-exposure.

Listening to Stefán, I found myself wondering whether 'destination wilderness' can exist. Can a landscape truly be said to be wild when thousands tromp through it on a hiking superhighway?

And with the clash of culture, people and nature comes a mismatch of expectation. Historically, few cabins had much in the way of amenities, insulation or sanitation, their primary purpose being short-stay shelters rather than destinations in themselves, as some have become. And modern hikers expect, if not chi-chi luxuries, at the least some possibility of heat and a toilet. But Stefán doesn't want to build a shower block and latrine at every Icelandic beauty spot. For one thing it would visually destroy the thing people have come to see and, for another, he can't; the landscape is protected. Which is good. 'But people do not want to carry around bags of their own poo . . . some of them don't even take home their KitKat wrappers.'

I suspect the amount of joy inherent in the sæluhús is apt to fluctuate depending on the amount of excrement and KitKats in the immediate vicinity.

Bad enough pitching up to discover one is not alone in a place, not an original thinker in one's desire to visit and see a Bradt-hymned wonder, but to meet people just like yourself there, to flush hot and feel yourself a charlatan, a caricature, *a tourist*, and – worse! – to find the place strewn with trash . . . It's like 1871 all over again, for these are not new problems as the following extract from William Morris's Icelandic diary attests:

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Tuesday, 25 July 1871  
IN CAMP AT GEYSIR

We can see the low crater of the big Geysir now quite clearly; some way back on the other side of Tungufjót I had taken it for a big tent, and had bewailed it for the possible Englishmen that I thought we would find there: however go we must, and presently after crossing a small bright river, come right on the beastly place, under the crater of the big Geysir, and ride off the turf on to the sulphurous accretion formed by the overflow, which is even now trickling over it, warm enough to make our horses snort and plunge in terror: so on to the place of turf about twenty yards from the lip of the crater: a nasty lumpy thin piece of turf, all scored with trenches cut by former tourists round their tents: here Eyvindr [Morris's Icelandic guide] calls a halt, and Evans [a fellow English traveller] dismounts, but I am not in such a hurry: the evening is wretched and rainy now; a south wind is drifting the stinking stream of the south-ward lying hot springs full in our faces: the turf the only nasty bit of camping ground we have had yet, all bestrewn with feathers and wings of birds, polished mutton bones, and above all pieces of paper . . . So there I sat on my horse, while the guides began to bestir themselves about the unloading, feeling a very heroic disgust gaining on me: Evans seeing that a storm was brewing sang out genially to come help pitch the tents. 'Let's go to Hawkdale,' quoth I, 'we can't camp in this beastly place.'

'What's he saying?' said Eyvindr to Gisli.

'Why, I am not going to camp here,' said I.

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‘You must,’ said Eyvindr, ‘All Englishmen do.’

‘Blast all Englishmen!’ said I in the Icelandic tongue.<sup>4</sup>

Human nature may not have changed but things cannot remain as they are and Stefán has plans. He told me that, the following spring, he intended to substantially repair sæluhús #7 Hvítárnes, built in 1930 – the oldest house owned and operated by Ferðafélag Íslands – and completely rebuild one of their largest cabins, #15 Þórsmörk Skagfjörðsskáli, to bring it up to modern standards by the season’s end. His plan was to take the 50s structure apart – a big red tin tabernacle type-affair – then put it back together in such a way that it was still recognisably Þórsmörk Skagfjörðsskáli; ‘only insulated and fitted with proper plumbing and electrics’.

‘I’ll keep the main timbers and reuse all the elements I can,’ he told me. ‘I want to keep the soul of it. That’s very important to me.’

Stefán was a hugely inspiring man, on the quiet. His dual roles as custodian and host conflict him sometimes, he admits, but he has a great belief that a balance can be struck which benefits both Iceland and the tourists who travel to see it. The sæluhús are key to this. No mere means to an end, they embody something of the Icelandic culture and history. The word *soul* jumped out at me when he said it because it seemed on the surface such an un-Stefán word – slightly mystical and woolly – but it’s the right word. The sæluhús are not uniform or interchangeable, they’re individuals with distinct personalities; monuments to the volunteers who built them. The cabins Stefán oversees have changed the country around them, generous offerings beckoning people

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in, manifestations of the spirit and people behind them . . . and *soul* is the best word we have for that, whatever that emotive cluster of ideas amounts to.

As we parted, I asked if I could return the following summer and help him rebuild #7 and #15. ‘Great!’ he said, smiling. ‘Bring a hammer and a decent pair of boots.’

## WHITE WORLD I

A year later I was back. A couple of days after my return, Stefán rolled up outside Kex hostel in his 4x4 – a black beast with thumping great tyres, a matchbox on doughnuts. We were set to drive out to Landmannalaugar in the southern highlands to collect a couple of rangers but first we drove to the Ferðafélag Íslands base to consult a map, drink strong black coffee and eat enormous custard creams with REYKJAVIK embossed on the front – Icelanders have a great interest and liking for coffee and biscuits, an excellent enthusiasm I share. Then we drove east on Route One, the road climbing over the carbuncular lava of the Hellisheiði plateau, wire-wool moss foaming grey-green.

Mountains started to appear. Some stood off in the blue distance, whilst others more immediate and dorsal fringed the road. We began to pass feathers of steam from hot springs, but after half an hour, when the plateau flattened out, I saw a domed complex half obscured by a billowing swoosh of cloud, a massive streaming safety valve. The Hellisheiði geothermal plant, the third largest in the world, sits on the active flank of the volcano Hengill, a mile from the road. The complex screamed super-villainy; futuristic, sci-fi military – a sky plume base amidst miles of zagging

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pipelines, source of a pylon army marching off to the horizon.

But now we were past the power station and up to the plateau's end where the road began a swift looping spiral down to the glasshouses of Hveragerði, the view opening inland and out to reveal mountains knuckling one side, shimmering silver sea and marshes the other.

Over and off Hellisheiði everything was incredibly green. Looking back, it seemed like we'd spun down an immense emerald cliff with the sun now flaring across us and the road rebalanced. Then we reached Selfoss – a town of early suspension bridge enthusiasts, final resting place of Bobby Fischer, childhood home of Björk – a place which continued the kaleidoscopic mix of concrete prefabs and corrugated self-built homes I'd experienced in Reykjavik. At Selfoss we stopped for food and I added ice cream, wafer-based chocolate bars and hotdogs to my list of 'popular Icelandic things apparently available everywhere'.

Selfoss was the last town. Once we'd swung off the main road villages and red farms thinned. The loss of the domestic coincided with the landscape hardening and the highlands ramping up. The road was a thick line in soft pencil, glossy and black; a smooth path for heavy hydro plant. The ice blue river to our right raced whiter. The pylons returned, strobing, wires swooping, nodding, keeping time. Here was the hard fix out in the wilds to power everything elsewhere. The river now ran in a deep cut, a trench smashed clean and straight through the rock. Giant workings massed – canals and dam walls holding back glacial lakes, funnels for turbines buried in brutalist Thunderbird boxes.



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Every bluff brought new monoliths until we topped out and sped alongside a series of pale reservoirs silvered blind by silt and milky sky. But no people. In the next hour we passed no cars and then the road ran out, ceding to gravel which we bumped along a while until we reached a gate, a chain between two posts, and a sign: *Ófært – IMPASSABLE*. We crunched around and beyond it, up to the top of a hill where black clinker ceded to snow. ‘A good time to piss,’ announced Stefán. So I walked away from the truck to piss, buffeted by a cold wind. Looking back over our path I saw a black denim world smeared with white and turquoise, an anodised sky fluorescing frosted light. All life and colour seemed beaten back by the wind and the cold but, no, there were lichens and mosses hanging on in the rocks at my feet. It was still a winter world, hardly yet spring. I was early.

Below, a small car stopped at the gate. A couple of miles behind it was another, set to meet it at the end of the road. Meanwhile Stefán had been round the 4×4 and lowered the tyre pressures ready for the next part of our trip, which would be over deep snow. Then we drove up and over the lip of the hill and disappeared out of sight.

For the next couple of hours we bounced and churned in snow holes, edged round hidden hazards and slushed in streams, enveloped in freezing mist. We were totally reliant on a boxy dash sat-nav, our vehicle a dot on its Game Boy screen, ghosting the line of a road buried metres beneath us. I spent a lot of the next hour staring fixedly into the opaque white world wondering what was through and beneath it. Visibility was only a few metres and when a feature did loom out of the haar it often took a moment for it to resolve a clear shape and character – cliffs steeppling up, seeming to

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crest and overhang as moss green breakers; snow slopes shooting away, boulders the size of houses. It was like we were rolling on a frozen sea, almost impossible to know if we were driving along the top of a wave or at the bottom of a trough; although Stefán had a good idea having driven this route a hundred times. ‘Most of these are me,’ he smiled, pointing at the puffy infilled tracks winding around us, ‘or rescue trucks. People shouldn’t be out here alone.’ After an hour we passed a memorial to a snowmobiler, a pile of rocks poking out of the snow. He was a crazy guy, Stefán told me, known for travelling great distances and going out on his own, but he crashed his ski in a blizzard, was hurt, tried to walk out, fell in icy water and died of cold. ‘That’s it,’ he finished, opening his hand on the wheel slightly, as if to add, *It happens*. But you come out here alone, I ventured. ‘Yes, but I’ve got a truck and I know what I’m doing,’ he replied, eyes on the snow sea. ‘But you’re right, I probably shouldn’t . . . but I need to get things done.’

## BLACK LAKE I

On my first trip to Iceland Haraldur Jónsson had suggested that I should go and see Kleifarvatn, a black lake in the middle of the Reykjanes Ridge.

Haraldur is an artist who lives in Reykjavik. We were introduced over email by the Icelandic writer Sjón, who said that Haraldur was the absolute best man to show me around. So we arranged to meet the night of my arrival once I’d unpacked and found my feet.

Waiting for my flight to take off, I’d begun to read *The Importance of Being Iceland: Travel Essays in Art* by Eileen

Myles – discovered in a secondhand bookshop the day before and bought on the strength of the title alone. ‘*Haraldur*’ appeared on page 22. It must be *my* Haraldur, I thought, and remembered my childhood bafflement with the amount of crime Bergerac encountered on Jersey. ‘*But how many banks can there be on Jersey!?*’ I used to shout at the television. As crime on Jersey, so art on Iceland: this is a place with two degrees of separation rather than six; everything rapidly triangulated.

Haraldur was described in the book as looking like Christopher Isherwood – another singularly well connected man.

‘He’s my best friend’ says Björk a few lines later.

Sjón himself appears just a few pages on.

Bingo! Full house.

When I met Haraldur, he did look Isherwood-esque, hair parted and swept over to one side. Like most Icelanders I encountered, he was dressed impeccably in natural fibres – wool suit, brogues, a good thick cotton shirt. We sat in the bar at the Kex hostel and had a beer. Icelandic beer is excellent, which is lucky because a pint costs as much as a meal back home. As we talked he waved and nodded to several people in passing, at one point introducing me to his friend Kristín, former singer of a local band: Múm.\* Ecstatic, beaming, I shook her hand, wondering

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\* Kristín Anna Valtýsdóttir (aka Kría Brekkan, born 5 January 1982) is an Icelandic vocalist and classically trained multi-instrumentalist. She is best known as a former front-woman of Múm – having sung on their first three/best three albums – *Yesterday Was Dramatic, Today Is OK* (1999), *Finally We Are No One* (2002), and *Summer Make Good* (2004). *Howl*, Kristín’s first full-length record under her own name, was released in 2015. Now simply

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who else might be in the room – Magnus Magnusson and Erik the Red, perhaps.

Later, over a meal of steak tartare and salted cod, I explained to Haraldur how I'd like to find bothies and sheds, and asked if there was anywhere slightly off the beaten track that such things could be found.

He drew me a map of Kleifarvatn, telling me about the black lake as he did so; how it sat on a fissure of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge; how, after an earthquake in 2000, a great deal of it disappeared; how, in some spots, the Earth was liquid and molten, boiling beneath one's feet. There were sheds around there, he said, and he would have driven us out there and shown me himself, but he was leaving for the Atlas Mountains of Morocco next morning. That said, however, in the time we had, would I like a tour of Reykjavik?

For the next hour we criss-crossed the city in Haraldur's battered red car whilst he pointed out landmarks and joined the dots of the city – the parliament, the prime minister's residence, the Opera House, the theatre school, the rocket-ship sweep of the Hallgrímskirkja Lutheran church, the different embassies, the Masonic Hall, the Grótta lighthouse. 'And this,' he said, slowing on a stretch of coastal road to the west of the city, 'is Björk's house. It's a good one, isn't it?' I agreed it was a nice one. 'Right!' he said, pleased, and then began an elaborate eight-point turn in the street outside, by the end of which I'd shrunk down in my seat, ears burning.

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known as Kristín Anna, her new LP, *I Must Be the Devil*, came out in October 2018.