

Ice Spy

Ingmar Henriksson's commute grows a little every week.

Tearing across the lagoon to the metronomic slamming of hull upon water, we've an appointment with a giant. Icy slabs zip by. One bears a mellow seal holding an outstretched fin aloft to the sun.

The monolith hangs distant in the chill. Through wind-whipped bursts, Ingmar explains how it is receding up the valley ahead. Normally a two-way process, this is what insidiously stretches his journey: the retreat approaching a metre per week.

The frigid air probes at the cuffs of my immersion suit; a malignant key searching for a lock. Despite this, it's the slightest warming that has destabilised the giant, the tiny wreaking havoc upon the huge.

This cold, liminal world creates illusions: the air so pure that objects appear closer. By the time the glacier looms from the dark, ice-crusting water, all conventional notions of time and scale have refracted in the piercing morning light.

The top towers far above, the base carving at earth hundreds of feet beneath. The colours are surprising: newly exposed ice glows bright blue, air crushed out by the vast, squeezing bulk. The face is riven with the smudgy veins of volcanic ash laid down over centuries. These blues and blacks suggest the battering forces of lifetimes spent twisting down the ice cap. It creaks gently, a wounded galleon run aground.

'Ice is a tenth of our landscape, it's our identity' states Ingmar. He relates how Iceland recently became the first country to hold a glacier funeral. A cortege of a hundred, including the Prime Minister, trooped up an old volcano, the ice on its back reclassified static – newly dead. 'Iceland is ice-land after all' he reminds. I smile at the moment of lightness.

And then it happened: my first thoughts the crackle of gunfire or a distant thunderstorm. I ricochet through various noises, settling on the final fibres of an ancient tree in a gale: an inexorable staccato of ripping sinews. The symphonic destruction builds, the guttural grumbling of a tired earth.

The second horror is visual and follows fractionally later. A torrent of ice shears into freefall, striking water that appears to instantly boil. Centuries compress into seconds. I visualise religious effigies, their stony gaze contorting into acid rain soft-focus. Again, my comparisons fall short. Soft implies a kindness missing here; the glacier has hardened, exposing harsh, razored edges.

As the waves barrel towards us, Ingmar explains why do-it-yourself glacier tourism is heavily frowned upon. Icelanders are accustomed to jeopardy, brought up between the twin pillars of folklore and geology: the supernatural and super-natural.

'If you mess with nature here, you will go home in a body bag' he deadpans. Neutralised by our respectful distance, the dying surges lick the hull with a choppy slap.

The silence leaves me pondering my small, incremental contribution. As far as the glacier is concerned I am both hunter and now hunted. Should I have come at all? Ingmar reads me: 'If you hadn't come then you wouldn't know. When you see these things, there's no denial is there?'

We point back to shore, Ingmar translating the origin of this place: wide, woodland glacier. I slip on the unfamiliar syllables, brow furrowing like the contoured ice. He repeats them at a deliberate cadence:

Brei - dam - er - kur - jo - kull

His glossy tones allow me to grasp each one, haunting in the heavy air. At normal speed, they freeze back together, cold and dissonant. So it crystallises: everything here resolves into the simplest units.

Around us, house-sized icebergs wander the lagoon in tidal purgatory. Their cobalt battlements rear up from a soup of sparkling chunks and the crusty jags of old rime. As fate pulls at them, they slowly rebalance in the water, but always smaller: a million diamonds in constant reduction.

Eventually, the distant mouth of the lagoon beckons. The Atlantic now busies itself dashing the final flashing facets into oblivion against the obsidian sands, closing the cycle. It's a reminder of life's commute: built of atoms - and returned to the elements.