

You can drown in the space between Heaven and Earth – a love letter to Iceland in three parts.

1. The big picture

In the beginning, God, or an accident, or God by accident, created Heaven and Earth. Now the Earth was formless and empty – mostly smooth, or so we say; but I have always been drawn towards the cracks in the surface. Luckily, they are everywhere now.

Driven by an acute awareness of my own scars and imperfections, I look for beauty in flaws – it is very easy to find. I like the small cracks well enough: the jigsaw puzzles of broken tarmac, sun-baked clay or stress cracks through ice. These are nothing more than hairline fractures in the fabric of reality: I like them, sure, but they seldom take my breath away. I *love* the giant rips and tears. Canyons sculpted by rivers and time, valleys carved by glaciers, earthquakes that fracture the landscape, tear it apart and leave it broken. I adore cracks in and on and through the surface.

I am equally drawn towards impact wounds. Bumps and bruises. Like mountains formed by slow, unstoppable collisions: blunt force trauma over thousands of years, *hundreds* of thousands – *millions* of years, in fact. While I struggle to comprehend the proportions of the 29 years I've been alive (surely the first 15 were twice as long as the most recent 14?), I torture myself by trying to wrap my head around accidental encounters lasting *millions* of years. Continental plates meet, compress sediment to stone, create folds through the landscape like ripples in the water and raise ragged mountains when neither plate will yield. Species come, flourish and go while the plates are still going through the awkward formalities of greeting each other. A word every now and then, perhaps once every millennia, every ten years or every other week. They speak in deep rumbles that shake the Earth. Tolkien's slow-speaking Ents had nothing on our continental plates. *Nothing*.

Other mountains are formed by magma flowing in between two layers of rock, forcing the upper layer to rise, protrude, bulge like a blister in the landscape. And others emerge when magma pushes its way through a wound in the earth's crust, gushing out like blood, gushing out as lava. The lava dries into a scab (which should definitely not be picked), which will sometimes rupture, again and again, and sometimes won't stop bleeding for years. They stand alone, these volcanic mountains, hypertrophic scars marking the places of damage forever and ever, or at least until the wind and rain wear them down. Nothing lasts forever, if you let forever last long enough.

Sometimes enormous rocks, or small, fall from the sky, creating craters the size of counties, or villages or pools. Glaciers carve and dig their way through mountains, as do rivers, as does time. None of them leave anything behind, if they can help it.

The Himalaya is growing through devastating earthquakes, levelling villages and burying people. But the mountains are beautiful, spectacular, breath-taking, with their sharpness and ice-clad unattainability. Kilimanjaro, the world's tallest freestanding mountain, is a scar from a scorching explosion in the ground. But still she is adored and admired, the beautiful African backdrop. Australia's best known landmark, Uluru, and her lesser known fraternal twin, Kata Tjuta, are leftovers from millions of years of brutality. A long string of processes stretching over 500 million years: millions of years before the first land plant grew, millions of years before the first insect, 500 million years before me. But now they are beautiful, unique, sacred and mysterious. They stand in a flat desert landscape that once was a sea, which used to be mountains that no longer exist. Craters form beautiful lakes, and glaciers leave wonderful scars. In nature, trauma is beautiful.

2. The middle distance

This is why I fell in love with Iceland. 40,000 square miles of broken land: to me, the most beautiful place on earth. She lies atop a volcanic hotspot – the Icelandic plume – a giant pipe that leads heat and smoke and steam out from inside our planet. She is the world's oldest child of divorce, and you know, tectonic plates have messy divorces. The North American Plate and the Eurasian Plate are splitting up and pulling Iceland apart in the settlement. They move away from each other at an average of 2 centimetres a year. But they stand still for years, build up tension then leap and pull, gouging rifts and fissures along the line drawn up between them. 8 centimetres one year, 14 centimetres ten years later.

Iceland is a treacherous country; she does not take care of her children. She is nothing like Norway. In Norway, valleys wrap around their villages like forts. They are such constant and unchanging places that people stay for generations. They stay until everyone agrees that the people two valleys over pronounce their As strangely, and the cityfolk laugh at your Rs. But Iceland changes, and surprises, and keeps her daughters on their toes. They have to be ready to shift, ready to move. Such things change a people.

In 2010, I was driving in a tour bus through Haukadalur, the valley that holds some of Iceland's most famous tourist attractions: the famous Geysir (which gives its name to all geysers) and some of its siblings. It was dusk as we drove through the valley, and between the scattered houses, steam drifted up from hidden thermal waters, unmarked geysers and possible witches' cauldrons. A recent survey conducted by the University of Iceland found that only 13 percent of Iceland's population was willing to dismiss the existence of elves as impossible. Although only 8 percent believed in them absolutely, 17 percent found their existence likely and 37 percent thought their existence possible. Driving through this landscape, seeing the steam drift up between bright purple heather and singular man-sized boulders of black volcanic rock, I couldn't blame them.

In the 1930s, the guide told us, an old couple were having breakfast at the kitchen table when they heard a loud, booming sound from their living room. A

geyser had opened under their living room floor, devoured their furniture and was flooding the house with boiling water. Since then, regular geological testing and measuring was conducted in the area, making sure the houses in the valley were safe. But, the guide added, no one is recommended to walk around in the wilderness here. You might step through the ground and find yourself boiled alive. One young man on the bus was googling away as the guide spoke, and claimed he could find no mention of such an occurrence online. Before the guide could respond, a fellow Icelander sighed, “This is Iceland, boy. Something like that would hardly make the news.”

This was the summer after the famous eruption of Eyafjallajökull. An enormous area of land was covered in fine volcanic dust, sharp as glass, which stuck to your fingers like microscopic burdocks. Clouds of ash were whirled up by the wind, blinding cattle and making their gums bleed when they ate dust-covered grass. The world blamed Iceland for weeks of cancelled flights worldwide, while many Icelanders – in the midst of their economic crisis at the time – found their livelihoods destroyed, and their businesses faltering.

“Are you not scared of another eruption?” I asked a woman I met during a horseback ride. “Are you not scared of earthquakes and boiling water and lava attacking you from every corner?”

She smiled, looked around at the beautiful landscape, closed her eyes and sighed. “No,” she said. “I live in Iceland.”

She was ready for anything.

3. The micro perspective

I used to be one of those children who was obsessed with stars. I knew all the constellations, I recognised the planets, I loved the moon and her craters, and I loved the darkness for showing me stars. But I had crippling panic and anxiety attacks throughout my childhood and teenage years – and at sixteen, I had a panic attack after seeing an animation of a comet crashing into Earth.

But right after I turned twenty-two, I looked up at the night sky and realised it was the first time I had done so in six years. As anyone who has suffered panic attacks will tell you, the fear of future panic attacks is worse than the attacks themselves. For six years I hadn’t looked up. I had made sure I wouldn’t catch sight of a shooting star to trigger a new attack. I made sure I wouldn’t see a star and remember the animation. I didn’t look up. I didn’t look. I didn’t.

The shock of this realisation made my legs buckle under me, my breath catch, my heart race. I had dropped one of my dearest hobbies to avoid being scared. In those six years, I hadn’t looked at the moon or the constellations, nor seen the planets. I hadn’t loved the darkness or named the moon’s craters. In one of those epiphanous moments that change the track of your life, I decided never to keep from doing anything ever again, not if the reason was fear.

A panic attack on a plane when I was eleven had kept me from flying since; at twenty-two, I ordered a round-trip ticket to Italy, alone. I cried all the way, but I didn't have a panic attack. I rode elevators up and down the tallest buildings I could find, until my pulse stopped racing when the doors closed. I went scuba diving where I knew there were sharks. I went rock climbing and looked down. I was still scared of earthquakes – the source of my very first panic attack.

Iceland trembles as she is torn apart in the divorce. So I went there. I knew the odds of an earthquake were high. I went to the very centre of the continental rip, Þingvellir National Park, a valley that shows the rift through its landscape: tall walls of rock and stone, deep fissures of clear glacial waters. One of these fissures, Silfra, is famous for its beauty. Often called the clearest in the world, the glacial waters spring into Silfra after a 100-year-long journey through volcanic rock, nature's water filter. The visibility in Silfra can stretch to 80 metres, the water has a permanent temperature of 2–4 degrees Celsius, and it's a prime location for snorkelers and divers. Snorkelling between the continental plates was just about one of the scariest things I could imagine – so I had to do it.

I am a big girl. The tour guide, Milo, had a range of dry suits in the back of his car, but none my size.

"Not a problem," said Milo, and gave me increasingly large men's sizes until we found one that could fit over my hips. It felt wrong: the crotch of the suit was somewhere around my knees, the arms were too long, and the legs were folding in bulging layers around my legs.

"Not a problem," said Milo.

They had brought the wrong number of gloves. Two left gloves too many, one right glove too few.

"Not a problem," said Milo, and fitted me with a left glove turned inside-out. "You'll be okay, just a bit colder on your left hand than your right."

We walked down steep stairs leading to a ramp leading into the water. We were under strict instructions: don't touch anything, don't step anywhere, don't stop swimming. At its deepest, Silfra is 60 metres. I lay there, floating in water that was just like air, the only differences being the slight grey line crossing over my goggles as my head went under and the freezing cold against my face. It was 60 metres of invisible texture between me and the next place I could put my foot, yet no way for me to fall down to find footing. I was suspended in the exact location between Heaven and Earth, between Europe and America – and I was taking in water through my oversized dry suit.

Buoyancy is rarely a problem when you are as big as me. I float like a champion. But water is heavy, a men's XXL dry suit can hold a lot of water, and panic is a useless emotion.

"Just breathe," I told myself. "The only thing you need to do is keep breathing for one more second. One more. One more." And slowly, I pushed myself forward the 400 or so metres left of our swim through the narrow passage. You cannot turn

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back. You have to push forward. *Just keep breathing.* I thought I was going to die, but at least I wasn't going to die frightened, I decided. I kept breathing.

Eventually I came to the ramp on the opposite side. Dripping, freezing, and beaming. Milo looked scared.

"Not a problem," said Milo. "You can get your money back."

"No thank you," I smiled, "I got exactly what I wanted out of this."

In nature, trauma is beautiful.