

Inga Bergman

Memories of a Childhood In Iceland

Picture this bay, that sparkles like blue sapphires in the sun,
like green emeralds when the cloud cover closes in
or turns a gloomy dark green and grey as storms stir it into a frightening boiling
pot
of waves as high as houses.

Picture how it stretches and opens to the western horizon,
beyond which looms the great continent of America, thousands of miles away,
and behind which the sun disappears every evening.

Listen, how everything grows quiet and hushed under the cloud cover
in the absence of the sun,
or how the bay huddles apprehensively
and braces it self against the lapping and crashing waves
when the winter storms howl across the strait.

Then picture the islands, protruding from the water like a lush, velvet green body
a knee here, an elbow there, belly, shoulders and breasts.
The movement of the sea, the tide and the tow,
exposing the rocky coast and wet black sandy beaches,
and then seeping back with a regular certainty.
The sucking and the sighing of the sea as it moves
gives the illusion that what we see is indeed alive and breathing.

The hilly regions of the largest island are dotted with white, fluffy shapes
nipping their way through the delicate, tasty mountain flora

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and larger, heavier shapes
wading through lush green lowlands,
deftly slinging their long, strong tongues around tufts of grass
clipping it off just so, a couple of inches away from the roots.

Nestled in the broad cleavage of two large hills are a couple of ancient white
buildings,
flanked by green fields sloping towards the sea.
Four little shapes are bopping in the green grass, bare, white, little bodies,
clad in lithe more than a pair of gaudily coloured shorts.
Red, blue, green, yellow—one colour each for easy recognition.
Every so often one of them stands erect and listens for sounds,
the tight little braids sticking almost straight out, while scanning towards the
strait
then a glance back to the three little brothers playing nearby,
the littlest one barely a toddler.
The head cocks a little in the other direction
and catches a sound coming from behind the house.

A woman's voice can be heard, clear and rich.
She always sings as she hangs out laundry.
Her song grows softer and slower as her eyes wander
towards the faraway shape of the town that sprawls
along the shoreline on the other side of the strait.
Her hand fumbles for fly-away strands of copper and pins them behind her ear.
She shakes out yet another wet sheet, and as she stretches it over the washing
line
her song grows stronger and more cheerful,
the lines punctuated with each peg that she drives home.

Rúna, across the way, says she can tell when it's mother's washing day.
She can hear her voice loud and clear.
She can probably also hear when mother calls us in at mealtimes.

We took refuge on the island from the squalor of a housing shortage and
poverty
that was rampant in Reykiaveik in the fifties.
We came together as a family
gathered back by my father from various foster homes,
where we were placed during mother's sudden and mysterious illness
and father's attempt to make ends meet with seemingly endless workdays.
This is where my parents worked together,
joining their powerful strengths and ingenuity,
with rarely an unkind word uttered between them,

to create the oasis of security that we,
the colourful children,
need so desperately.

My memory of time before the island has grown scant over the years.
There were hard times, that left many scars on my family.
My parents were deeply wounded
and they lashed out at each other,
in desperation.
I was only six, but old enough to understand the anguish.
Life was unfair.
I knew that my parents deserved more than what they got.

I picture my mother waiting in line,
time and time again, anxious,
waiting for appointments with city officials,
reasoning, arguing, pleading and at last breaking down.
Weeping quietly, collecting herself, clenching her fists
and bearing them down on a desktop,
sending stacks of papers jumping.
Then, with the same hands, gathering our little hands
into her hot palms as she rose to leave.

I treasure pictures of my mother
coming home with my brothers newly born, one by one,
swaddled in her soft, white arms.
I remember her gentle voice,
as she comforted them and cuddled them to her breast.
As she sang us off to sleep in the evening
ever so softly, until there wasn't a care left in our wee hearts.

I remember her laughing eyes and cheerful morning songs
that always made it worth while starting afresh, every day.
The gay laughter as she shared in our delights.
The firm, yet gentle instruction, or reproach when needed.
And the glow of love, that would have sent me to the end of the world
if that is what she had requested.

And I remember the immense emptiness and pain
at being separated from my parents and my brothers.
Most of all, I remember
how my heart cried out in need for my mother.
There were no songs in my aunt's house.
No warm kisses or a lull-a-bye.

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No smiles in the morning.
No sun.

We had been shackled up in temporary housing when mother took ill.
Relatives took us in,
somewhat reluctantly some of them.
I think it was my silence that finally got to my father.
My eyes had gone deep and watchful, my face pinched
and my body very, very quiet.

In his desperate search for a home he happened upon the deserted island.
No one had lived there for years and the only habitable house
was already two hundred and fifty years old.
Aside from two coal stoves it had no commodities, no running water,
but at least we would have a roof over our heads.

I never knew how my mother took the news about our new home.
By the time she was released from hospital the joy of being reunited
overshadowed everything else.
We had been apart for almost three months.

By the time mother joined us harvest was in full swing.
Some of my uncles gave up their evenings and weekends to help father.
The air was filled with the sweet smell of hay and the sound of men's voices,
talking and laughing as they worked.
I was instructed by my father to help mother,
and to call one of the men if I couldn't manage heavier tasks.
Mother was not to exert herself.

We worked hard that summer, and before we knew
old man winter was upon us,
coddling everything in cold grey, and later white.
The men were gone.
Mother was already shouldering her load of work.
There were twenty-four cows to be milked in the morning,
breakfast to be made, water to be carried from the well into the kitchen,
milk buckets to be washed, billies of milk to be carried down to the boat,
little bottoms to be washed in the tub, after the dishes were put away.
The bread was made in the afternoon,
while the little ones napped,
and clothes mended or made.

My mother's wardrobe slowly changed shape,
was carefully cut into smaller shapes with scissors,

and reappearing in a changed and smaller form
on our little bodies.

“No matter,” she explained, “my waist isn’t what it used to be.”

In the afternoons there was also music.
For two hours every weekday afternoon Radio Reykjavík
broadcast classical music.
Our house changed into a music hall.
When they played operatic works
mother changed roles
and joined forces with the famous singers of the world.
At other times, after she had taught me some of her songs,
we would sing together,
her voice making scrolls and roses around my simple lines.
These were glorious times.

Mother’s voice also mesmerised the cows.
She sang as she worked, and swaying as they listened
chewing their cud slowly and thoughtfully
the cows became less possessive of the milk
flooding the buckets in no time at all.
They even seemed to join in
with a short humming sound every so often.
When that happened mother would almost roll into the ditch giggling.

By nightfall, after the late milking, mother grew quiet.
She was tired.
And yet, as we nodded off to sleep,
there was always time for an embrace, warm kisses and a lull-a-bye.

In spite of all hardship, and in spite of my mother’s loneliness,
these were the times that filled me with more happiness
than I had ever experienced before.