

FIVE MEDIT- ATIONS ON DESIRE AND LOSS NEAR GLACIAL MORAINES

Angela Rawlings

1. EROS, EROSION

Within the context of this issue of *Scapegoat*, with its emphasis on desire and landscape, erosion implies not only “loss, destruction, and diminution,” but also a state of “being with/ in eros.” Desire may, then, be understood as an erosion of sensibility, a confusion of responsibility, an urgency to evade death.

From my windows in Reykjavík, I stared 128 kilometres across the North Atlantic to Snæfellsjökull, a glacier-covered volcano. Lore couched Snæfellsjökull as a healing centre, with one of the world’s major ley lines crossing through its core. It has also been rumoured to be a meeting place for aliens, and even Jules Verne situated the start of his *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* in a cave on the volcano’s flank.

I crept through my seventh month of chemotherapy, carrying with me the words *desire* and *patience* as I sought the glacier

for kinship and solace. Through trauma, how could I learn empathy for more-than-human selves—ecosystems, glaciers, moss, nests? Fast-reproducing cells ceased activity through my treatments, including cancer cells, as well as those implicated in digestive-tract lining, hair and nail growth, and all mucous production. I studied my desire—that sensible confusion, that life-urgency—as a progenitor of comprehension and loss.

2. SPARKING DESIRE THROUGH EMBODIED LANGUAGE

The word “glacier” functions as an interface to notions of the glacier and the entity itself. We have linguistic and visual documentation of the glacier going back much earlier than the glacier we can currently see. Our comprehension of the glacier is, therefore, contingent on an inherited memory of the glacier, preserved within languages. The word “glacier”—both in its sound and in its visual construction—links itself to human relationship with this entity historically earlier than we can necessarily trace, at least in terms of attitudes held towards glaciers at the time when the word was constructed. Still, the word as relic—as a kind of archaeological linguistic artefact—does link us with a span of history within that word.

In Iceland, since settlement in the ninth century, *jökull* has been the dominant word used to signify *glacier*. The etymology of *jökull*¹ stems from Old Norse and Proto-Germanic; it was a diminutive of *jaki* (meaning “ice floe”). As Icelandic holds close similarity to its parent language, Old Norse, the word *jökull* has had long-term usage. And just as Icelandic holds an uncertain future for its own survival, so do glaciers. The word *jökull* has become an archive of future loss.

When we hear the word *jökull*, we receive inherited traces of utterance from bodies that experienced Icelandic glaciers 1,000 years ago. To familiarize myself with the word’s pronunciation, I place *jökull* in my mouth and utter it repeatedly. This proximity cultivates desire—desire for the word, desire for the idea of

glacier, desire to better understand the glacier, desire to be with the glacier, desire *to become glacier* (as verb, as action), desire *to glacier*. Learning Icelandic as an adult (and with English as my mother tongue), I mapped the phonology to better understand the pronunciation acrobatics I would undertake.² The combination of fricatives, plosive, and monophthongs produces a powerful explosion of voiced vowels and unvoiced consonants. The word starts with a push, a force of voice through the mouth, and ends in the near-whisper of the dark “ll”—ominous synonymy when partnered with its signified abiotic entity.

Through my repeated pronunciation, I familiarized myself with the contours of *jökull* as an attempted and attentive embodiment of a centuries-long relation between vocalized sound and represented ecosystem component. Repetition strengthened my familiarity but also estranged me from the word as an indication of meaning, as I inhabited the collection of sounds to explore their choreography within my body. I remembered my experiences with different Icelandic glaciers, and held landscape memory within my mind as I pronounced *jökull*.

Next, I compiled compound words and place names affiliated with *jökull* from an Icelandic dictionary.³ This exercise stretched between a visual investigation of the word in repetition and its sonic counterpart. Icelandic boasts a variety of compound words that feature *jökull* within them. The list of compound *jöklar* includes references to numerous geographic features, such as *jökulá* (glacial river) and *jökulruðningur* (moraine). In fact, English even adopts as a loanword the Icelandic compound word *jökulhlaup* to refer to glacial floods that occur from sub-glacial volcanic eruptions. The list formed the material for a new visual poem that I entitled *In Memory: Jökull* (see below). To create an intertextual resonance, I typeset this similarly to visual artist Roni Horn’s *All the Names of the Lava Fields in Iceland*—a list of compound names and landscape-referent repetition (*-hraun*, which means *lava field* in Icelandic)—on display at Listasafn Íslands. In my list, *jökull* stretched as a poetic landscape inhabiting paper, a counter-map emphasizing the

word’s relationship to its linguistic cohabitants rather than its geographic placement. *Jökull* dominated the page, informed by other words with which it cohabited, yet omnipresent through its insistent return. Both the pronunciation and transcription processes transformed my lack of familiarity to one intimate with the terrain of the word.

jöklabelti jöklabogi jökladrasl jökladrottning
 jöklaður jöklafar jöklaferi jöklaferssaga
 jöklaferð jöklafélag jöklafló jöklafræði jöklaflá
 jöklagarður jöklagleraugu jöklagola jöklagrjót
 jöklaflaup jöklafljóð jöklaheinn jöklafríða
 jöklajarðfræði jöklajárn jöklajörð jöklaklasi
 jöklaklukka jöklakobbi jöklakráka jöklakvíka
 jöklaland jöklaloft jöklamaður jöklamenjar
 jöklamóberg jöklamót jöklamús jöklanam
 jöklarannsóknir jöklarit jöklarauðningur jöklarödd
 jöklasafn jöklasalat jöklaskáli jöklaslóð
 jöklasnjór jöklasóley jöklasund jöklasýn
 jöklatímabil jöklatjald jöklató jöklatryllitæki
 jöklavatn jöklaveiki jöklavísindi jöklapýfi jöklóttur
 jöklun jökulalda jökularmur jökulauðn jökulaur
 jökulá jökulálma jökulás jökulbarð jökulbarinn
 jökulbákn jökulbelti jökulberg jökulbergskápa
 jökulbergslag jökulbjarg jökulbleyta jökulbogi
 jökulborg jökulbraut jökulbrá jökulbráð
 jökulbráðnun jökulbreði jökulbreið jökulbreiða
 jökulbrestur jökulbrjóst jökulbrot jökulbruni
 jökulbrú jökulbrún jökulbunki jökulburður
 jökulbyrða jökulbæli jökuldalsfé jökuldalskyn
 jökuldrag jökuldrós jökuldýngja jökuldæla
 jökuldæld jökuleða jökulefja jökulegg
 jökuleldgos jökulelfa jökulelfur jökulendi jökuley
 jökuleyja jökuleyri
 jökulfaldur jökulfarg jökulfari jökulfáður
 jökulfagaður jökulfeldur jökulferð jökullilla
 jökulflatneskja jökulfláki jökulfliki jökulfjót
 jökulflóð jökulflúð jökulflúðir jökulflæmi jökulfold
 jökulfor jökulfoss jökulfótur jökulframburður
 jökulfreri jökulfýla jökulfægður jökulfær jökulför
 jökulgaddur jökylganga jökulgarðsbútur
 jökulgarður jökulgeil jökulgeimur jökulgerði
 jökulgjá jökulgljá jökulgljúfur jökulgnípa
 jökulgnúinn jökulgormur jökulgos jökulgrafa
 jökulgrafinn jökulgrár jökulgrjót jökulgróp
 jökulgrugg jökulgrund jökulhaf jökulhamar

jökulhamrahlíð jökulheimur jökulhella
 jökulhengja jökulhetta jökulhalli jökulhjarn
 jökulhjálmur jökulhjúpur jökulhlaup jökulhnúkur
 jökulhorn jökulhóll jökulhótel jökulhraun
 jökulhreyfing jökulhroði jökulhrun jökulhrúga
 jökulhryggur jökulhrönn jökulhúfa jökulhvarf
 jökulhvel jökulhvelving jökulhvilt jökulhvirkill
 jökulhvítur jökulhöll jökulhörfun jökulís
 jökulísjaki jökuljaðar jökuljaki jökuljörð jökulka
 jökulkaldur jökulkastali jökulkápa jökulkimi
 jökulkjarni jökulklassur jökulklassi jökulkleggi
 jökulklettur jökulklofi jökulklungur jökulkollur
 jökulkorgur
 jökulkrúna jökulkrýndur jökulkuldi jökulkúfur

jökulræma jökulrönd jökulsandur jökulsig
 jökulsigrari jökulskafinn jökulskafi jökulskalli
 jökulskál jökulskreið jökulsker jökulskjöldur
 jökulskrið jökulskriða jökulskör jökulslakki
 jökulslétta jökulsnjór jökulsorfinn jökulsól
 jökulspíla jökulsporður jökulspunga
 jökulspæna jökulspöng jökulstallur jökulsteinn
 jökulstífla jökulstóll jökulstraumur jökulstryta
 jökulströnd jökulstykki jökulstæði jökulsvali
 jökulsvarf jökulsvelgur jökulsvell jökulsvæði
 jökulsvörfun jökulsýn jökultangi jökultá
 jökultímabil jökultími jökultodda jökultoppur
 jökultota jökultunguskál jökultyptur jökulurð
 jökulurinn



Figure 1. *In Memory: Jökull*.
 Svínafellsjökull, photo by A. Rawlings, March 2013

jökulkúla jökulkúpa jökulkverk jökull jökullag
 jökulland jökullaus jökulleða jökulleið jökulleir
 jökulleira jökulleirlag jökulleysing jökullind
 jökullitaður jökullitur jökulloft jökullón jökullægð
 jökulmark jökulmáður jökulmelur jökulmenjalag
 jökulmenjar jökulmerki jökulminjar jökulmjöll
 jökulmor jökulmóða jökulmyndaður
 jökulmyndun jökulmæling jökulmær jökulmörk
 jökulnám jökulnepja jökulnúinn jökulnöf
 jökulport jökulrák jökulrákaður jökulrákir
 jökulreið jökulrið jökulrispa jökulrispaður
 jökulrof jökulrofsfoss jökulrót jökulruðningur

jökulvatnaset jökulvatnasvæði jökulvatnset
 jökulveggur jökulvegur jökulvindur jökulvök
 jökulvöxtur jökulyrðlingur jökulyrsa jökulyta
 jökulþekja jökulþil jökulþilja jökulþoka jökulþúfa
 jökulþúfur jökulþykkt jökulöld jökulölduröð
 jökulöxl skriðjökull Jökladalhorn Jökladalir
 Jökladalshæð Jökladalur Jöklafold Jöklalind
 Jöklari Jöklašel Jöklatún Jökluðóttir Jökulson
 Jökulbak Jökulbanki Jökulbotn Jökulbotnar
 Jökulbrekka Jökuldalavísi Jökuldalir
 Jökuldalsheiði Jökuldalshreppur Jökuldalur
 Jökuldjúp Jökulbunga Jökuldælingadrag

Jökulfall Jökulfell Jökulfirðir Jökulfitjar Jökulfjall
 Jökulfönn Jökulgil Jökulgilskvísl Jökulgilstindar
 Jökulgrindur Jökulgrunnur Jökulhaus Jökulháls
 Jökulheimar Jökulhjallar Jökulhlíð Jökulhnjúkur
 Jökulholt Jökulhvolf Jökulhæð Jökulhæðir
 Jökulkambur Jökulker Jökulkinn Jökulkriki
 Jökulkrókur Jökulkvísl Jökull Jakobsson
 Jökullækur Jökulrani Jökulrós Jökulrósadóttir
 Jökulrósarson Jökuls Páttur Búasonar Jökulsá
 Jökulsá á Breiðamerkursandi Jökulsá á Brú
 Jökulsá á Dal Jökulsá á
 Fjöllum Jökulsá á Sólheimasandi Jökulsá
 í Fljótsdal Jökulsá í Lóni Jökulsáraurar
 Jökulsárbotnar Jökulsárgil Jökulsárgljúfur
 Jökulsárhlið Jökulsárlón Jökulsárós
 Jökulsársandur Jökulsárufs Jökulsdóttir
 Jökulshöfuð Jökulskarð Jökulsson Jökulstallar
 Jökultindur Jökultunga Jökultungur Jökulvarða
 Jökulvatn Jökulvellir

Jökull features prominently in numerous compound words and place names throughout the country. According to Joshua Nash, in ecologically embedded languages “[t]he same word can be used to describe human and other life forms.”⁴ Within Icelandic, *jökull* demonstrates this duality as it is not only a geographic feature, but it can also become the name of either a human male (*Jökull*) or female (*Jökla*). Icelandic society has developed a stringent naming law for humans, so the cultural value of each name carries with it an ecologically embedded tradition as well. In contemporary society, the gesture to name a child *Jökull* or *Jökla* could even be argued as a conscience-raising preservationist act, given the predictive models at stake for Icelandic glaciers.

Words with similar construction in Icelandic also become interesting to consider, especially when placing their semantics alongside what sonically shifts. These words carry a semantic link, a bond, a relationship because of their similarities, and therefore their usage may inadvertently imply the other (even if subliminally, based on their mutual linguistic materials). One of these is the word *vökull* (attentive).

One colloquial expression containing *jökull* exists—*jökulkalt* (bitterly cold). This is significant

because colloquial expressions and idioms hold the power to impact the semantics of the signifier by aligning it with its clichéd counterparts. The presence of only one sense-based idiom for *jökull*, despite its significance to survival in Iceland over the last 1,000 years, suggests a deep-seated respect for the entity *jökull* signifies.

What happens when one takes *jökull* in one’s mouth and utters it in the presence of the glacier? Does the sense or nonsense of the word transform when confronted with what is named? If we listen to our utterances not only for their inherited semantics but also for their sounds, how do we train ourselves to place greater value generally with sound? Could that re-valuation extend, then, to the environments supporting those soundscapes?

3. QUEST, QUESTION

At Jökulsárlón, at Vatnajökull, icebergs squeak as they crack. Waves crash chunks of ice onto the black-sand beach as airplanes pass overhead, vehicles zoom along the Ring Road, and tourists remark on the site in a cornucopia of languages. At Dyngjujökull near Kverkfjöll, I listen to a glacier crack with near sonic-boom force; I confront myself with what I don’t know. And what I don’t know is this landscape with its geomorphic language and *jökulhlaup*. I attempt to move in an intuitive way to stressed or dominant cracks of glacial tongue and the roar of the flooding river Jökulsá á Fjöllum, but my body cannot anticipate their phrasings in the ways I can with human languages or composed music. At Sólheimajökull, I record the glacial run-off.

With my audio recordings, I performed soundwalks and intentionally tried to find soundscapes that were without human sounds. This is extraordinarily difficult in our time. The narrative that unfolds in the audio could be considered a “truth” or a reality, except that it is still so highly selected (position of microphone held, who is holding it, whether or not she makes her own presence known, the selectivity of the material that is being recorded, and any/all audio).

Is there a language in this soundscape? Assuming I have some inherent capacity to listen and understand, what would the soundscape communicate to me? And how do I communicate with the environment? What does my (unaware, learned) behaviour demonstrate to the environment? If the earth is a body and alive,⁵ how do I foster love for this earth-body I seek to understand? In the case of these *jökklar*, love developed before I could form questions.⁶ Wherever I travelled the last four years, my mind perked up at the mention of Iceland. I followed each sub-glacial quake’s seismographic representation.⁷ I plotted my fascination with this geomorphically active earth-body, declared it publicly via my blog “No Slumber for Volcanologists.” Thus began my love affair, with *jökklar* as my lover — and yet, through all of my research and romantic musings, I remained unable to explain why I typified my attention as desire.

I worried about this hunger for Iceland, for *jökklar*. I worried about the anthropomorphism of using the word “lover” to signify a desired relationship. My worry is born of fear; it is not true. I worry that my obsession may resemble objectification or commoditization of a place. But do I truly see and hear place-based entities? Do I understand that I do not understand?

The anthropomorphic temptation is to make the earth like us (in an attempt to understand by relating our bodies to its body); notions of a feminized earth—of Mother Earth, of earth-goddess Gaia—have persisted throughout centuries and cultures. As James Lovelock asserts, “[w]e have to use the crude tool of metaphor to translate conscious ideas into unconscious understanding.”⁸ The analogous temptation in the twenty-first century is to extend this anthropomorphism comparing the plight of women worldwide to the plight of a feminine world—where macrocosmic exploitation (as in violation, pornography, commoditization, objectification) threatens to engulf the more individuated respect and love (as a lover, or a mother).⁹ Rather than outright reject or suppress my inherited or learned anthropomorphism, I chose to follow it further when I recognized how

my familiar human-love (manifesting as lust, curiosity, respect, longing, passion, even jealousy) had surfaced for *jökklar*.

This evidence of love reflected primarily in my desire to understand *jökklar*, with the hope this might help me to understand (even dimly) what I don’t know but what I intuit. The collective human databank may be rich with cumulative knowledge, but on an individual level each of us knows so little. Consider this microcosmically: what do you know of your own body in a physiological sense? Extend your answer to nature. How is your own limited bodily knowledge akin to your limited understanding of nature? Is nature what you think it is? How is nature even knowable?¹⁰

Is there a desire to listen to the unknown heart of this other, to respect the other as other, to dissolve a perceived bodily boundary between other and my body, to connect, to interconnect, to discourse, to intercourse? According to Philip Shepherd, “[i]f you are divided from your body, you are also divided from the body of the world, which then appears to be other than you or separate from you, rather than the living continuum to which you belong.”¹¹ Is it not through the witnessing of an extreme, holy, lifted beauty that I estrange myself from myself to then come again to my unknown self and seek to know myself better through that other that reflects and refracts me to me? Isn’t that exactly what we want, to see ourselves in what surrounds us? Isn’t that how we have built our stories, our metaphors — out of mystery and reflection? Is that not desire?

4. THE PROBLEM OF ENJOYMENT

How do our desires impact ecosystems? Does any environmentally engaged and/or articulated experience hide the reciprocation of human-ecosystem transaction—the impact of actualized desire?

An Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is a natural-resource management instrument used to comply with and enact environmental protection policy. Introduced as a tool to raise environmental awareness in the 1960s, EIAs were formally adopted into the U.S.

National Environmental Policy Act in 1969. The European Commission formalized use of the instrument in 1985 via the introduction of the EIA Directive. EIAs are used to provide information to companies, governments, and NGOs prior to construction projects and new resource extraction or waste storage processes. One frequent measurement of EIAs qualifies and quantifies the value of ecosystem services offered in a defined region, specifically stipulating *enjoyment* as an ecosystem service. Human enjoyment. Implicit: “What am I getting from the environment? What am I taking?” Capitalist rhetoric around the valuation of human enjoyment of ecosystems hides, negates, redacts, and erases any sense of reciprocity in the “transaction.” Human enjoyment of landscape necessarily impacts the ecosystem where the interaction occurs, but the impact on the environment through enjoyment is not articulated within EIAs.

Though analyses of product impact on the environment emerged in the 1960s, it wasn’t until 1990 that Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) emerged as an intensive cradle-to-grave instrument. LCAs factor in all inputs and outputs involved in the development and distribution of products, quantifying the environmental impact to provide producers and consumers with data to aid environmental harm-reduction. While LCAs conventionally analyze the development and distribution of products, consider placing *human enjoyment* as a product—distributed through tourism to a site such as Snæfellsjökull, or a leisure activity such as downhill skiing. How might LCAs performed on human enjoyment obviate the environmental transaction and ecosystem impact while simultaneously informing the need for EIAs to reassess the anthropocentrism of *enjoyment value*? Could applying cradle-to-grave assessment of enjoyment redress the speciesist emphasis on human benefit and human desire implicit in EIAs as policy instruments?

By walking through any place, I emit carbon dioxide. I impact with the sounds my body produces through movement and vocalization, with the weight of my footsteps, with the wind

produced through my movement. The scent of my body signals into the surroundings. Any of these actions may have an immediate, delayed, or cumulative impact on non-human entities that also exist within the shared space.

Who lives under the newly exposed moraine rocks I press into the ground, or kick or remove? How long does it take moss to regrow that I touch or trample? Fresh, sub-arctic moraine can take thirty years for an initial plant colonization of species such as moss campion. The grey moss in Iceland can take up to 100 years to regenerate after contact. As other primary and secondary successors colonize rock, sand, and soil, we impact each other with our co-existent, urgent desires.

5. DEATH AND THE REST

Following my ninth round of chemotherapy, I walked home via Laufásvegur — a pretty residential street in downtown Reykjavík. A rainstorm with hurricane-rated winds had blown through the previous night, and the street was littered with branches. Among the detritus, I found a sizeable cross-section of a wasp’s nest. Impulse surged through me: *take it*. I picked it up, inspected it for residents alive or dead. Abandoned. *Transaction: death for death. Take it*. The nest was dead, dry. My interior had commenced its medical desertification, mucous ceasing production to impact saliva and other necessary lubrication for body function. *Dead. Dry. Commonality*. Some dumb or numb part of me sensed the nest as symbol, and I took it to remind myself that I’d endured the hospital visit alone.

On my windowsill, the nest signified a glacier in miniature. It loomed synonymous: ash-coloured and pockmarked and fragile and broken. On the wasp’s nest, I placed four fox teeth, three golden plover feathers, two wishes, and one scavenged phrase. The phrase was offcut from an old book, out of which I’d harvested partial pages for a handmade book. As offcut, the text was incidental, an unintentional leftover from an extra-literary project. I’d found it on the floor as I swept up the project

remnants—a small sliver of aged paper with a serif font that read: “who had been responsible for.”

Problematic words and ideas populate these paragraphs. *Commonality*, as in a shared state, as in common, the commons. *Take it*: an impulse, desire’s urge to possession.

The problem of being alive. Where to live, where to nest, what one requires, how what one requires also informs desire, and how what one desires likewise informs requirement. The problem of conceptualizing commons and ownership. The desire others have for one to be alive, and the manifold impacts such desire has on any ecosystem. Who had been responsible for any ethic, desire, life. Whose eros, whose erosion, whose response.

1 “Jökull,” Wiktionary, en.wiktionary.org/wiki/jökull.

2 The phonological breakdown of *jökull* commences with a voiced palatal fricative (j), followed by a front rounded low monophthong (ö). An unvoiced velar plosive (k) precedes the closed high back monophthong (u), and the word finishes with the pre-stopped, unvoiced lateral fricative (ll). “Icelandic,” *The Language Gulper*, www.languagesgulper.com/eng/Icelandic.html.

3 Snara, snara.is.

4 Joshua Nash, “Toponymy and Ecolinguistics,” *History and Philosophy of the Language Sciences*, hiphilangsci.net/2013/11/13/toponymy-and-ecolinguistics.

5 In “Thinking Like a Mountain,” Aldo Leopold introduces the idea that the mountain is alive and capable of emotions like fear. This resonates with my analogy that nature is not only alive, but also an entity to love and that loves. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 129–133.

6 In *Meditation at the Edge of Askja*, Páll Skúlason discusses how his reflections on Askja did not occur until after he had distance from the place (in his case, while in Paris). Páll Skúlason, *Meditation at the Edge of Askja* (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2005).

7 “Seismology and Earthquakes,” Icelandic Meteorological Office, en.vedur.is/earthquakes-and-volcanism/earthquakes.

8 James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia: Why the Earth is Fighting Back—and How We Can Still Save Humanity* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 178.

9 Vandana Shiva, “Interview with Policy Makers,” European Citizens working for the global agenda for human development, www.eugad.eu/2010/10/the-earth-is-female-vandana-shiva.

10 Lovelock encourages the word “ineffable” to cross the boundary between theology and science. Here, this notion of the ineffable figures prominently—though I would champion more the notion of a known ineffability or an inexpressible known. Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia*, 177.

11 Phillip Shepherd, *New Self, New World: Recovering Our Senses in the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2010), 147.