

Andri Snær Magnason

The Bride's Belly

A story of glaciers and love

In May 1956 my grandparents went on an unusual honeymoon. They got married on a Friday, packed their bags the same evening and went on a four-week trip to measure and map the uncharted territories of Vatnajökull, Europe's biggest glacier. They were team leaders on this trip, leading a group of volunteers: geologists, mountain lovers and truck driving mechanical wizards that could keep the snowmobile engines running even under the most extreme weather conditions. They went into uncharted territories, had no idea where the greatest cracks would be found in the ice or what kind of weather they could expect, as forecasts were unreliable at the time.

Once they were caught in a storm and were stuck inside the tent for three days, until only the tip of the tent could be seen from the surface and they had to be dug out. I asked my grandfather: Weren't you cold? Cold? He answered with surprise. We were just married! I was about 11 back then and found it hard to find a rational

connection between marriage and keeping warm.

The glacier was unmapped at that time and most of the places were still unnamed. So the place where my grandparents were stuck in a blizzard has a name now. A low rising hill from the glacial plateau in the

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northern part of the glacier is now called The Bride's Belly. You can find it here on a map:

Brúðarbunga, Kverkfjöll,
1781m
N64 35.378, W16 44.691

Brúðarbunga is now registered as the 15th highest peak in Iceland. I asked my grandmother about the trip a few days ago. She is 94 now and she is in really good shape. We went through the maps and old log-books. We went through the diaries of the trip and the trips after that. My grandparents built mountain huts at the edge of the glacier and on the top, which later became

shelters for scientists, outposts to gather information about these last uncharted frontiers of Iceland.

When my grandparents were mapping these territories, they perceived the glacier as eternal. It had always been there, as long as any man could remember, and according to their best knowledge, it would always stay there. My grandfather used to take a 16mm camera with him on these trips. Once I said that I wished he had filmed more of my grandmother. You could always film the glacier, I complained, but my grandmother at young age would be something more worthwhile of filming. But now, if we take the glacial data from 1956 onwards and apply current global temperatures and future predictions to them, we will see that this great body of ice will vanish within the lifespan of someone born today before they reach the age of my grandmother. Nature has stepped out of geological time and is starting to change during the lifespan of a single human. We can calculate the pace at which the glacier is collapsing and we know that by 2120 it will be only a tiny fragment of its old self.

The Icelandic Glacial Research Society my grandparents were members of mapped the glacier floor. They found invisible valleys and mountains that nobody had ever seen before. You can look at the pictures

Andri Snær Magnason is an Icelandic author who has written novels, poetry, short stories, essays and plays. He is the author of *A letter to the future*, a short inscription on a plaque dedicated to the glacier Okjökull which was declared dead. The plaque was unveiled during a funeral ceremony held in Iceland in August this year. You will find *A letter to the future* quoted in full at the end of this article.



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and imagine these landscapes in 200 years, now frozen but then possibly nice rugged valleys with small scrubby bushes or green moss formations. If my descendants ever wonder about my grandparents' travels and look at the old maps, they will have to imagine 400 meters of ice above them and all around them. They will have to imagine a snowmobile travelling 400 meters above their heads and they will say to their children: If you draw a line between these peaks, that is the path your great great grandmother travelled. We are now grieving over the disappearing glacier, but the next generations will see blades of grass growing on this land, once again proving the miracle of life. They will see hill, valleys and geothermal areas that had no name for people of my generation.

I have travelled parts of Vatnajökull myself, but I am far from being as adventurous as my grandparents. When travelling over Skeiðarárjökull, it is hard to believe that this vast, seemingly endless body of ice is vanishing. Our travels take us through landscapes unlike anything I have seen before, over landscapes that look like miles of turtlebacks, through a forest of black pyramids, past cracks that moan and gurgle, past streams that fall into bottomless holes that remind me of the lair of some alien snakelike creature. The black forest is made of sand that had formerly filled holes. Suddenly we encounter something like a road, smooth and endless.

After one day you feel like being on Solaris, the foreign planet in the novel of

Stanislaw Lem. You try to interpret the forms you encounter, try to understand why all of them look almost man made. A pothole here, a pyramid, a highway there. It feels as if the glacier was showing us what is killing it: from the pyramids to highways.

The glacier does not disappear with dramatic noises or calving ice the way we see in documentaries from the Arctic. The glacier vanishes softly, like a silent spring. It just melts away, retreats slowly, silently, calmly, but its appearance is strangely dead, almost like a slain fish. It gradually loses its glow, lies flat and lifeless and far up in the middle of the mountain, you see chunks of ice and a line showing where the glacier was just a few years ago. You try to grasp this great mass that is gone, and understand it has just changed form: it has become ocean and it will rise slowly, flooding land and destroying houses in distant parts of the world.

The old skaldic poets used a language in poetry that was saturated with Nordic Mythology. To say "sky" in a poem you would not say "sky", but "the dwarf's helmet". To say "earth" you would say "the bride of Odin". When the poets became Christian, they faced a problem. How do you talk about the creator of heaven and earth when the poetic language forces you to talk about God, the creator of the dwarf's helmet and Odin's bride? It took decades to find new metaphors and a language to speak about God without being entangled in the old metaphors. I feel that the issues we are confronted with are so large that I don't really have a language to talk about them and it seems that there are no maps to navigate properly into the future. What I see as nature is becoming something we have never seen before. But I do hope that what I see as destruction will eventually become something our descendants can love and cherish. ♦

A letter to the future

Ok is the first Icelandic glacier to lose its status as a glacier. In the next 200 years all our glaciers are expected to follow the same path. This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it.

Ágúst 2019

415ppm CO₂

This is a shortened version of a text which will be published in April 2020 in the book *Tales of Two Planets. Stories of Climate Change and Inequality in a Divided World*, ed. by John Freeman, New York, Penguin Random House.

Another book by Magnason (*On Time and Water*) will be published in more than 20 languages, e.g. in German in May 2020: *Wasser und Zeit. Eine Geschichte unserer Zukunft*, Berlin, Insel Verlag.