



## HÉÐINSFJARÐARGÖNG: *A Slow Understanding*

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Guðny Róbertsdóttir is speeding. I can tell she is nervous, because she keeps glancing down at the illuminated dashboard. She is driving into the heart of the mountain.

'Icelanders believe there are different kinds of knowledge,' Guðny says. 'The wind brings urgent messages, those that must be acted on instantly. This is why its noise blocks out all other sounds. The water brings information that you can send away again on the next tide. But it may return to you – the sea allows dialogue. The rock brings a slower understanding: you carry it in your pocket, or live beside it, and the knowledge it holds will be revealed over time.'

We seem to have been driving through the mountain for a long time, but reason tells me it can only be a few minutes. The messages in the rock hang heavy over us.

We are heading for Siglufjörður, a fishing harbour at the northern tip of Iceland. It's a one-hour drive from the regional capital, Akureyri, which nestles at the inland end of Iceland's longest fjord. Mountains loom over the car, and though the winter sun catches their peaks, it's so low in the sky that we drive in shadow all the way. Towards the end of the journey, just before the small town of Ólafsfjörður, the road is rudimentary. There is no barrier between the tarmac and the cliff face, although a few flimsy poles have been placed around the sharpest bends for safety. They sway in the wind as if to beckon us over the edge. It's good to be

with a driver I trust.

For many years in winter, every traveller's journey ended in Ólafsfjörður. The road to Siglufjörður, which wound over two high mountain ridges and through the valley that lay between them, was impassable.

In the past, Icelanders built their roads around rocks. They feared the Norse gods, who had thrown boulders down to earth in anger at the actions of men or giants. When moving a rock was unavoidable, a holy man would be summoned to recite placatory words to it.

A road sign warns drivers of the risk of landslides. It shows a cluster of rocks tumbling onto a car. The image is secular enough and yet, on these roads, it acquires a supernatural subtext. *Don't upset the gods.*

These days the movement of rocks is commonplace.

Ólafsfjörður and Siglufjörður form a borough called Fjallabyggð – 'Mountain Settlement'. People in Ólafsfjörður like to gossip about their neighbours in Siglufjörður, and people in Siglufjörður like to gossip about their neighbours in Ólafsfjörður. For example, people in Ólafsfjörður often remark that in Siglufjörður, no one clears the snow from their path. The residents of Siglufjörður do not care about such slights: they suffer worse weather than Ólafsfjörður, and there is a limit to how much snow can be shovelled in a day.

On 2 October 2010 Ólafsfjörður and Siglufjörður were

brought closer to each other with the opening of two tunnels blasted through the mountains between them. The perilous overground route is no longer used, even in summer, and a six-hour journey now takes twelve minutes.<sup>1</sup>

The 7km tunnel between Ólafsfjörður and Héðinsfjarður and the 4km tunnel between Héðinsfjarður and Siglufjörður are collectively known as the Héðinsfjörður Tunnel, or Héðinsfjarðargöng. The tunnels are named after neither settlement, but the abandoned Héðinsfjarður valley between them. This was an astute political decision, but it also confirms my suspicion that the route through the tunnels owes fealty not to civilization, but to the wilderness.

Local artist Frída Gylfadóttir organized a community project to knit a scarf long enough to stretch through the tunnels on the opening day. 'The scarf symbolizes the soft, warm, human connection between our towns, which should be cherished,' Frída says, but as she talks of unwinding its woolly length through the darkness, she reminds me of Theseus, wary of losing his way in the labyrinth, clinging to his string.

The Czech firm Metrostav constructed the tunnels. The engineers' first action was to build a shrine into the rock at the site entrance. Even so, there were fatalities. The Madonna in her sky-blue dress, the plastic flowers, did not appease the gods.

The engineers drilled for four years, moving 200 metres deeper into the mountain every month. The routine: drill, insert dynamite, retreat, detonate, return, clear rubble, drill. My friend Lara tells me her brother took some footage on the sly, and I pester him to let me watch it. I regret my eagerness. It plays like a disaster movie: everything is out of control. The men are panicking. Their drills have unleashed ground water, which gushes in jets from the rock-face through the very holes into which they are trying to insert dynamite. The water keeps coming, flooding their footholds and rising around their knees. They gesticulate as wildly as they can in their cumbersome work gear. The feeble illumination from their lamps seems to generate more shadow than light. I'm afraid something dreadful is about to happen. The film stops. Lara's brother sighs and tells me that was just a normal day. He might be bragging, but I doubt it.

During those years, the rocks cleared from within the mountains altered the landscape of the valleys. People who had lived with the same view for decades acclimatised to a panorama of temporary geological formations, until one day all the rubble vanished, taken away for roadbeds in other parts of Iceland. One rock remained at the request of the director of Ólafsfjörður School. It stands in the school car park, a monument to the citizens' battle with the mountain. It dwarfs schoolchildren, and is larger than most adults, stout at the base and pointed at the head. Its body is scarred by dynamite. It resembles one of the Stone Age flint arrowheads, which people once called thunderstones, believing Thor had thrown them down to earth. Now archaeologists ascribe their shape to human agency.

Iceland is a mutable landmass, and humanity is not the only influence at work upon it. The island exhibits dramatic



evidence of its transformation by glaciers and volcanoes, and these forces of fire from below and glaciers from above are still active.

The land itself was once molten rock. Plate boundaries pass along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge which crosses Iceland to the east of Siglufjörður, and when the earth's crust is pulled apart at these points, lava wells up to fill the opening and hardens into basalt. During the Ice Ages the young island was buried beneath glaciers. The ice advanced, gouging a channel through the rock, creating the high mountain ranges under which Héðinsfjarðargöng passes, the deep fjords leading out to sea. Parts of Iceland are still covered in ice sheets. One day, there will be new mountains.

The *Eyrbyggja Saga* describes a shepherd's vision. One night, as he sat alone in the hills, 'the whole north side of the mountain opened up, with great fires and burning inside it and the noise of feasting and clamour over the ale horns.'

When the shepherd told people of this wonder they grew anxious. To dream of a journey into the mountain is an omen of death. Soon after, the news came that the ruler Thorstein had drowned at sea, a 'bitter loss'<sup>2</sup> to the land.

The road into the mountains may augur death, but it can also lead to poetry.

The *Snorra Edda* relates how Suttung the giant hid the mead of poetry (distilled from honey and blood) deep inside Mount Hnitbörg. Odin, the god of death and also of victory, longs to drink the mead, which turns everyone who drinks it into a poet or scholar. He bargains with Suttung, promising that he will do the work of nine men all summer for one sip. Giants are devious creatures, and when the season is over,



*Olaus Magnus: On Strange Properties of Some Mountains*

Suttung refuses to pay Odin. Another giant, Baugi, offers to help Odin steal the mead, and he begins drilling into the mountain. (His name means ‘ring-shaped’, so he is both maker of the tunnel, and its personification.) When Baugi declares that the tunnel is finished, Odin blows into the entrance, but chips of rock fly back in his face, showing that it has no exit. Odin realizes that Baugi is Suttung’s accomplice, and plans to imprison him in the mountain. He says nothing, and lets Baugi continue drilling. But it is an unwise giant who tries to trick a god. At the critical moment Odin turns into a snake, slithers into the hole and steals the mead.

The people of Siglufjörður retell these myths fondly. There is an easy overlap of pagan and Christian belief in Iceland, without immoderate devotion to either. It has been a long time since pagan gods were accorded such respect in my own country.

As I travel through Héðinsfjarðargöng I recall the famous analogy offered as part of the case for King Edwin of Northumbria’s conversion from paganism to Christianity. Human existence, said an unnamed counsellor, is like ‘the swift flight of a sparrow through the room wherein you sit at supper in winter.’ The protective space the sparrow enters is warmed by fire and cheered by company, yet these human comforts divorce it from nature. It is no place for a bird: ‘flying in at one door, and immediately out at another, whilst he is within, [he] is safe from the wintry storm; but after a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight, into the dark winter from which he had emerged.’<sup>23</sup> For the first time it occurs to me that Edwin’s sparrow might have been relieved to return to the dangers of winter.

Compared to the interminable drive through Héðinsfjarðargöng, crossing Héðinsfjarður takes an instant. A pin-hole of light promises the tunnel’s exit, and then the valley opens before us. Before we can crane around to view our surroundings, we find ourselves back in darkness again, and the interlude resists recall like a dream. Or rather, like a *déjà*

*vu*, for Héðinsfjarður is the ghostly twin of the first valley we left behind. Where is the town? Where are the people? Did everyone disappear while we were inside the mountain? A few settlers farmed this rock long ago, but they gave up or perished without leaving a record of their lives. We might have travelled through time: other than the road on which we drive, there is no hint of the era that prevails here.

I ask my elderly neighbour Kristjan about the history of Héðinsfjarður. Kristjan’s face is as lined as the flow-banded rock, and he speaks in whispers like a Greenlander, a habit he must have picked up while teaching in the Arctic. Characteristically, he won’t answer my question, but bundles me into his car and drives me through the tunnel. He stops abruptly in Héðinsfjarður.

He motions me to walk to the mouth of the fjord and grumpily points out a speck on the cliff. I set off, feeling self-conscious, leaving him smoking by his car. When I reach the spot at which the mountains confront the Greenland Sea, I find a cross. A sign informs me that I stand on the site of the worst air disaster ever suffered in Iceland. In May 1947 a plane flying from Reykjavik crossed the peninsular; it flew over Siglufjörður and was last seen heading out to sea. Lost in heavy fog, it circled back on itself, and crashed directly into Mount Hestur, the last peak in the range that separates Siglufjörður and Héðinsfjarður. All passengers and crew were killed. Volunteers sailed from Ólafsfjörður and Siglufjörður to clean up the wreckage and bury the bodies.

As Kristjan and I drive back to Siglufjörður, we do not speak of the accident.

The inhabitants of Siglufjörður feel cut off from the world during winter, but the weather that isolates the town also shields their eyes from the peaks that imprison them. As clouds descend into the valley, the mountains seem to fade away. Occasionally, when the cloud lifts, there’s a hint of something more substantial. But since the cliffs are covered with fallen snow and the clouds are full of falling snow, there is little distinction between earth and sky.



'We are like blind people,' says Guðny. She means that the surroundings must be sensed rather than seen.

It occurs to me that the mountain may not wish to be written about. My camera dies without warning the moment I attempt to photograph the interior. The notebook in which I wrote the first draft of this essay disappears during a flight from Akureyri to Reykjavik. The supplementary files are wiped from my memory stick.

It's illegal to walk or cycle (or indeed ride any open vehicle, including a horse) through Héðinsfjarðargöng. It is not a place to linger. Icelanders, normally inclined to dawdle on the road, put their foot down here. The tunnel is dimly lit by a seam of fluorescent bulbs running along the roof. Every so often the gloom by the roadside brightens to show a passing place, equipped with an emergency telephone sign and a fire hydrant. No concrete covers the walls, nothing disguises the uneven blast marks in the basalt. The only cosmetic work on the mountain is the smooth surface of the road. The engineers chose to mix the asphalt with lysite, hoping that the chips of white rock would lighten its colour, making the road more visible in the darkness.

A school bus drives through Héðinsfjarðargöng five times a day. I take it when I leave Siglufjörður for the last time. I don't have to pay the driver, a genial man who takes a bite out of an aniseed biscuit as I board. Everyone is in a good humour these days: during the month I have spent here, spring has come. I smile and say, 'Góðan daginn'. He revs the engine and the local radio station comes on, playing news and advertising jingles, followed by the opening notes of 'Enola Gay' by Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark. The irony amuses me, and I allow myself to be gently uplifted by the tune. The bus zigzags along the harbour and grinds uphill towards the tunnel.

It's apparent at first as a tiny speck, no larger than many of the rocks that litter the mountain face. I have learnt the patterns of these rocks by heart, and can gauge from their visibility how much snow fell during the night.

Suddenly, we're in darkness. I can no longer see the page I'm reading, and the radio cuts out.

<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_8cuxbjAouo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8cuxbjAouo) for a lyrical ten-minute film of the drive through the tunnels (accessed 30 April 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Palsson and Edwards' translation (Penguin, London, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, II.13 (sourced from J.H. Robinson, *Readings in European History*, Ginn, Boston, 1905).

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