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Back Where I Belong



Urban Volcano

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Illustrations: Börkur Sigurbjörnsson
Publisher: Urban Volcano

<https://urbanvolcano.net/>

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BACK WHERE I BELONG

I look out the window and into a gray winter day. There are dark clouds hanging low in the sky, but at the moment it is neither raining nor snowing. In the street outside, cars drive past in a continuous stream, throwing dirty slush onto the sidewalk.

I'm in the big city. I'm in Reykjavík. That I know for certain. I also know I've been here for a while. I've been here for weeks, months, years. I don't know exactly.

I look away from the window and explore my surroundings. Right in front of me, on the other side of the room, there is a chest of drawers, next to a bed, neatly made up with white linen. The surrounding walls are also white. The inside of my world is white and clean but the outside is gray and gloomy. What has become of the colors of my life? The green grass, the blue sky, the yellow flowers...

I look at my hands, the old wrinkled skin. My life's hard labor has taken its toll. I'm not the strong farmer I used to be. I clench my fists and unclench them again. I still have some strength left in my body, so I put my hands on the arms of the chair, push myself up, and walk slowly across the room.

I gently stroke the top of the chest. Just like my own hands, the old wood is worn. I close my eyes and enter the work shed where my father is sanding wood. I watch him for hours, shaping the raw material into this beautiful chest of drawers. For the ten-year-old boy I am, it seems like magic.

I open my eyes and gaze at the collection of photos scattered across the top of the chest. I pick up one of the frames and hold it in my trembling hands. There we are, together in front of our farmhouse by the fjord, young and smiling. I'm wearing a gray suit and a white shirt. You're wearing a blue dress and a white apron. I know the dress is blue, even if the photo is black and

white. I bought it in the cooperative the autumn after we got married. It was the first gift I gave you as my wife.

The photo is taken on our first wedding anniversary. The photographer is Danish. He is traveling around the island, documenting Icelandic country life, and makes a stop at our farm, maybe by chance, maybe deliberately.

“Why don’t we invite you to a small celebration?” you ask the photographer’s interpreter. “I’ll bake some pancakes and brew some fresh coffee. It’s our first wedding anniversary. We got married one year ago. On this day.”

While we eat, you talk endlessly about the life by the fjord, the landscape, the people, the weather, the customs.

“You’ll have to pay old Snjólfur a visit,” you say. “He’s a curious old loner... If you pass that ridge and go down into the valley below you might see some wild reindeer... You’re lucky that the wind is blowing from the northwest today. It may be a bit chilly but look at the clear blue sky! Imagine if it were blowing from the southeast. It would be warmer but raining... The large stone down there by the road is the biggest elfish castle by the fjord. The road workers didn’t dare touch it. That’s why the road takes such a large bend around it...”

The poor interpreter can hardly find time to bite into his pancake, but the photographer must like your initiative because he sends us the photo all the way from Copenhagen as a token of his gratitude.

I put the frame back onto the chest of drawers and turn around to head back across the room. There's a young man sitting in the chair next to mine. He looks at me and smiles. He's wearing a dark-gray suit and a white shirt. For a moment I think he looks just like me in the Danish photographer's photo. He's like the ghost of myself visiting from the past.

I walk over to him, slowly, one step at a time. When I reach my destination, I turn around, carefully put my hands on the arms of the chair, and ease myself into the seat.

"And who are you, young man?" I ask, turning to the young man.

"Grandpa, it's me, Emil," he answers. "Sóley's son."

I close my eyes and see Sóley running around the grassy slopes of the hills above the farmhouse. She's five years old. It's spring. I'm fixing a barbed-wire fence that got damaged by the heavy snow during the winter—the winter of 1944 to 1945. The snow retreated late. The hay reserves ran low. Rusty died that winter, the light-brown sheep with the rust-red dot on her

forehead. Over the years, she had been a reliable source of healthy and strong lambs.

Sóley runs to me, smiling. I see excitement in her eyes. She's innocent and oblivious of the effects of the harsh winter.

"Look, Dad, I found a *sóley*," she says, laughing, revealing a meadow buttercup in her hand. "My flower. But now it's yours. I'm giving it to you."

"Thank you!" I take the flower and bring it to my chest where it sticks to my woolen sweater. "You know I already own the most beautiful *sóley* in the world."

"I know," Sóley replies, shrugging, and she returns to skipping between the rocks and grassy knolls. She runs around, knocking on stones, greeting the hidden people who live inside.

I open my eyes and look at the young man sitting next to me. So he's the son of my little Sóley. I can believe that. He has the same eyes and the same smile.

"Now she's gone, your grandmother," I say to my grandson. "One of these days I'll be traveling east to attend her funeral."

"Grandma's funeral was a month ago," says the young man.

I close my eyes and see the small church at the doorstep of our farmhouse. I'm cutting the grass of the front lawn. The Icelandic flag is flying at the middle of the pole. I'm getting the church ready for a funeral. My

eyes wander up to the farmhouse. You're inside baking pancakes and brewing coffee, preparing the reception. From the back of the church I can hear the digging of a grave.

I remember the day clearly. Your father goes to check the nets out on the fjord. It's a calm autumn morning. I'm going to go with him but am called to lend old Snjólfur a hand with harvesting the last of his hay. "Go and help old Snjólfur," your father says. "I'll take care of the nets." Midday the weather suddenly turns, the wind starts blowing, and rain starts pouring. Nobody knows exactly what happens out on the fjord, but your father doesn't make it back.

I open my eyes and look out the window. I'm in Reykjavík. It's snowing. The traffic moves slowly down the street outside. There's a long line of cars inching forward at a snail's pace. The drivers seem restless and I can feel the tension rising as they look impatiently ahead, longing to reach their destination faster than the weather permits.

I look away from the window and explore the white-painted surroundings. There's a young man sitting in the chair next to me. His blond hair, blue eyes, and friendly smile remind me of myself when I was his age.

"And who are you, young man?" I ask to satisfy my curiosity.

"I'm Emil. Your grandson. Son of Sóley."

I close my eyes. I'm standing on the recently mowed lawn in front of the church. It's summer. The sun is shining and the flag is flying in the summer breeze at the top of the pole. Sóley and I walk hand in hand toward the church. I'm wearing my Sunday suit and she's wearing a white dress. We look at each other and smile. I cannot believe how fast she has gone from being a small girl skipping between stones in the hills above the farm to a young woman, on her way to walk down the aisle—into a new chapter in her life—into holy matrimony. I open my eyes and look at my grandson.

“It's nice of you to visit,” I tell him. “Have you traveled far?”

“No, I live in West Town. It's only a few minutes' drive.”

“And your mother? What news can you tell me of her?”

“She just went out into the hall to talk to the nurse. She'll be back shortly.”

That's good to hear. I always like having my little Sóley around. Especially now when you have departed. It's good to see familiar faces.

“Your grandmother has left,” I observe. “Soon I'll be traveling east to attend the funeral.”

Emil smiles and nods his head. Maybe that's the reason he's here. He's going to drive me east. I

look forward to being back in the countryside. I look forward to being back by your side at our farm by the fjord.

I close my eyes and am standing in the middle of the field with a wooden scythe in my hand. I'm cutting the grass under the warm August sun. You're walking slowly across the field, carrying a bag and a bottle.

"What a wonderful afternoon, my darling!" you exclaim as you approach. "I brought you lunch. Bread, pancakes, and coffee."

I put the scythe aside and greet you with a kiss. We sit down on the stones in the center of the field and I attend to my bread and coffee. I'm really hungry after the morning's hard labor. You talk of the fabrics you're going to buy at the cooperative this autumn—the curtains you want to replace. Before long, I finish my lunch and kiss you goodbye before you return to the house. I've got little time to lose. I must make the most of the dry and sunny weather, so I pick up the scythe and go back to cutting the grass.

I open my eyes. Sóley is sitting in the chair next to me. She's not the young girl she used to be but a mature woman. A young man is standing by her side. He reminds me of myself when I was his age. He reminds me of Sóley when she was his age. It must be her son, Emil.

“It’s time for me to leave,” I say. “It’s time for me to go back to the countryside.”

They both smile at me and Sóley caresses my old and veiny hand. I smile back and close my eyes. I feel the calm come over me. I’m going back—back where I belong.

Börkur is an avid storyteller with a keen eye for quirky characters, funny dialogs and vivid scenario descriptions. Much of his writing falls within the genre of realistic fiction and his stories are more often than not based on real events in the author's life. Although the tales contain grains of truth, they are melded with fiction, making the reader curious to know the line between reality and fantasy.

Books

Among Other Things, flash fiction (2024)

Talk To Strangers, short stories (2019)

Flash 52, flash fiction (2017)

999 Abroad, short stories (2012)

Links

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