

We Were Here
Ewa Marcinek





I have to restrain my own hand, so eager to touch the past. My impatient fingers crave to dance along the contour of people, animals, and plants—the small figures and symbols carved into the yellow stone thousands of years ago. Standing inside a pyramid in the middle of Vienna—*stolen* pieces of Ancient Egypt, cut into even cubes, shipped to Europe, and put on display in the Kunsthistorisches Museum—I would like to rest my forehead on the cold limestone. I would like to sync my lips with those of the ancient scribe who pursed and licked his lips while the chisel in his hand engraved the sacred symbols.

“We were here. We were here. We were here,” the whispers of the past insist.

“Hello,” I mouth gently. To calm their desperation, I add: “Message received.”

I’ve never carved my name into anything. I find it a rather aggressive, if not an ignorant, act to mark trees,

benches, stones, or walls with your name or initials. A desperate delusion that we can somehow stop time and exist forever. I find it passé on the existential level.

Yet, recently, in Iceland, in Reykjavík, I caught myself actively insisting that I do exist. “I’m here. I’m here. I’m here. I’m here,” I tell everyone who will listen. People smile, but a little grain of pity stuck between their teeth makes their smiles fragile. What’s more, I try to convince others like me that they exist as well. Under the guise of cultivating our friendship, I engage them in conversation about the highlights and challenges of our emergent being. I want so much to exist: not for one season, but for good. I hope that together, as a group, if we would find a way to *be*, maybe we could also *last*. So, I support those who doubt, I listen to the frustrations of those who don’t, but the world has tried to prove them wrong, and I remind others that they cannot quit. Not before their first or next book is out. I urge them: It’s very easy to stop being a writer—too easy when you are an immigrant.

I never wanted to be an immigrant, I always wanted to be a writer. My vision was simple: I will write as much as I read. I will double the pleasure of living the most adventurous of lives without ever having to leave my house. I will daydream for a living in the safety of my bedroom. But the gods have a sense of humour: nine years ago, I migrated over two thousand six hundred kilometres away from what I once called home, away from my family, friends, and my language.

New to immigration, I was deluded by the notion that time would stop in the place where I was absent. But, new family members were born and people were dying—without me. It took me a while to learn how to exist in Iceland and Poland at the same time. I still find it a balancing act to somehow be present for those who I love: the people in each of the two worlds.

I got married last autumn and things got a bit more complicated. A Pole living in Iceland meets a Brit raised in France. Now instead of two, I have four countries and languages in my life. Very international. And also tiring. I have many doubts. Not regarding the marriage, but myself. Who lives like this? Who am I?

I was born in 1986, two months before the radioactive cloud of the Chernobyl disaster reached my hometown in the west of Poland. A cloud, I assumed, would protect me in the same way my Catholic upbringing and my communist childhood were supposed to protect me from ever being considered entitled, or else a praise-hungry, validation-seeking, culture-hopper. A citizen of nowhere.

Truth to be told, I don't remember communism in Poland. All I remember are the colourful nineties and Coca-Cola flooding our towns and villages. With waves of capitalism pouring from the West to the East, we were gaining freedom and losing safety. Our world was changing, but I didn't know a thing about it. To me, it was just life. An A-student, I spent my time in school, church,

and parks, reading, wandering around, writing my first stories and poems. When I was thirteen, I announced to all my friends: I'm going to be a writer one day.

I'm thirty-seven years old now, and yet I live like an exchange student in an English-speaking expat bubble. My address changes all the time. I share flats with other immigrants. I do not own much. Plus, the carbon footprint of my air mileage is disgraceful. My work lacks structure, but it gives me a sense of purpose, and yes, I could think of living in a van one day. With all this confirming my demographic cohort, I fear being a caricature of a Millennial, belonging to the so-called *Me-Me-Me* or *Avocado Generation*, never growing up, and spreading myself too thin, over too many countries, cultures, and languages. I worry about wrecking my soul in shallow waters.

He is an architect, my Brit raised in France, and his love encourages me to work with space instead of demolishing it. Unlike when I first moved to Iceland, this time, I won't be breaking myself into four pieces. This time, I'll try to be gentle, kind.

I like to imagine my heart as a modern open flat with four areas that can also function as one. While keeping my eye on what's happening in Poland, I can rest in France, but work in English in Iceland.

Our dream house is under construction, and before it will be done, finished, I'll keep tearing my hair out, crying and laughing, hysterically, asking my partner: "What

were we thinking? Can we really live like this? How will we afford it?" Hoping and praying that the house without walls, the house we are building, will not collapse under the weight of social norms, other people's expectations, and our own cowardice. Meanwhile, to soothe my anxiety, I'm using the past and history to find those similar to me: writers who flourished through their geographically and linguistically extended life, or at least those who lived and worked well—in spite of it.

A man in a woolen coat crosses Austurvöllur. He pulls the collar of his coat up, against the freezing wind biting at his neck. The bell on the cathedral's clock strikes noon. Yet, to him, this winter day seems darker than the six years he spent in Niederschoenenfeld prison, after that bloody cock-up: the communist revolution in Bavaria that he was part of.

"Scheiße, scheiße, scheiße," he curses the wind.

After fifteen years in Iceland, he—a sailor, a writer, a butcher's son, and once even, for a period of two weeks, the Minister of Immigration of the short-lived Bayerische Räte-republik—has learned very little Icelandic. Enough only to glance through the Morgunblaðið newspaper, before he crumples its pages, and sticks them in the toe of his shoe, where a hole has started gaping at the world two winters before. The few Icelandic words he knows are definitely not enough to embrace the local swearwords wholeheartedly. Not on a cold day like this.

"Scheiße, scheiße," he repeats, this time louder, knowing the wind will silence him.

Scheiße is the only German swearword I know, but I like how blunt it is. That's why in my short sketch, I've put it in the mouth of Albert Daudistel, an impoverished German writer who lived and died in Reykjavík. He might have been a prototype of a local immigrant writer. Over six decades later, a young German academic Jonas Bokelmann told me the story of Albert Daudistel during a cold walk near Austurvöllur, and afterwards, he generously shared his findings with me.

Albert was an adventurer, involved in the revolutionary movement in Germany, who later escaped the Nazi regime, and in 1938, found refuge in Iceland. I imagine Albert Daudistel being exactly that: blunt. He was embittered as well, after the years of not publishing and relying on his wife Edith to provide for both of them.

Daudistel was twelve years older than Halldór Laxness. Did they ever drink coffee together? Laxness knew German and published books in Germany at the time when Daudistel's texts were withering in a desk drawer. Albert wrote about Iceland. Did these two writers ever speak or was it only an occasional polite small-talk that left them both with nothing? From the letters and writings, we know that in his later years, before he died in Iceland in 1955—the same year that Laxness received the Nobel Literary Prize—Albert Daudistel became something of a cynical eccentric, bitter about the present and the future, a victim of his Icelandic circumstances and the prolonged frustration.

Some academics believe that intellectuals in exile meet a common fate: they either escape reality and bury

themselves in local history, as if to anchor themselves to the shore of the new land, or they, like Daudistel, vow not to adapt, not to compromise—they become eccentric outcasts.

I'm not yet there, at the fork in the road between the amateur historian and the victim of frustration. I'm lucky. I'm not in exile. I chose for myself to leave my homeland. Yet, I self-diagnosed myself with a small inclination towards the local history, the Icelandic past. As if there would be an answer in it confirming my presence, offering me an excuse for being who I am.

I'm not frustrated. Things have been going very well for me. Books. Grants. Jobs. I don't even cry these days. Although, there was a time, soon after moving to Iceland, when I wept day by day, week after week. My life was broken in two and it hurt. Back then, "a dry day" felt like a Sunday rest, a day that gods would like me to celebrate with a glass of fizzy hope.

Though, I like it when a good book makes me cry. As if there was a string running from a page, through my heart and my throat, up to my eyes. With one blink—my chest cramps. Words and sentences pull at my eyelashes. A tepid tear drops on paper. The last time I cried over a book was when I read about the first Icelandic female writers.

What a coincidence that they—the first Icelandic woman to publish a book of poetry, the first Icelandic female novelist, and the first Icelandic woman to publish a play—were all Western Icelanders: immigrants

escaping the harsh reality of their homeland, looking for a better life in the West, in Canada. Júlíana Jónsdóttir, Torfhildur Hólm, and Hólmfríður G. C. Sharpe.

With every sentence, the string binding me to the text has tightened, reverberating a familiar sound:

“I have not yet decided what to do with my poems. I simply was not certain if they were worth the publication costs, and I have always been so poor—and still am—that I cannot cover the cost myself. Perhaps someone at home would be interested in publishing them,” wrote Undína, one of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century Icelandic immigrant poets.

I kept reading. I couldn’t believe how much echo there was:

“This little collection is written by an entirely uneducated woman, who has no other background than difficulties in life, and it is therefore only to be expected that the poems may contain many mistakes. But I hope that the reader will show mercy in his judgment and consider the fact that the author is an uneducated shepherd...” That’s how Kristín Hansdóttir opened her collection *Fró* before adding: “All things considered, it’s quite daring to let these childish poems appear in public.”

On these words the string pulled hard. Heat gathered behind my eyelids. I didn’t shed a tear. No. I cried like a baby left in a supermarket by a mother who is too busy to care. I cried like someone just adopted the smelly cat I named Rysiu, whom I had fostered for six months after moving here. An old sickly creature that I brought numerous times to a vet, and to whom

I promised myself not to get attached, though I failed at that completely. Oh, Rysiu! I cried with my mouth open, squeezing it—the book, not the cat—to my chest. I cried because almost a hundred years ago, this Icelandic writer, Kristín, didn't know she had a right to exist, and neither had I.

As I cried, I held her and all the others, long-deceased, in my arms. Hólmfríður, Torfhildur, and Julíana: the first Icelandic women to publish their writings. All women. All immigrants. I cried because there was no money, no one to help them, because male writers could be very mean back then, as it was not well looked-upon for a woman to pick up a pen. I cradled these women in my arms, and I cradled myself, and my immigrant writing friends, and anyone who ever felt that they had to use a knife to prove that they were there.

Recently, I've been proving that I exist in Croatia. I was invited, among other writers, to represent Icelandic contemporary literature at a festival in Zagreb. To be honest, it was a bit confusing. Upon my arrival, I realized that I have more in common with Croats than with Icelanders. Polish and Croatian sound alike. These are the languages of emotional directness that either bring you straight to the point or straight to the heart. With no excessive politenesses, yet with a formal elegance. Unlike Icelandic, I can understand Croatian without ever learning it. When I arrived in Zagreb, I arrived in my language family.

“So who am I, a Polish immigrant writing in English

and living in Iceland? Am I a mistake in the festival program? A hole in the Icelandic system?” I cried.

But in Zagreb, the window to the future was open, and someone from the year 2122 decided that I deserve to be on stage, that I do belong. Because in the Library of Tomorrow, my book *Ísland pólerað*, or *Polishing Iceland*, has already been catalogued, registered. In this Library of Tomorrow, you can find my name under the *XXI-century Icelandic writers* label, or maybe also in *Icelandic immigrant writings*, or at least, you can look for me in *Poles in Iceland*, but I’m there.

Sometimes I wonder which of us, the immigrant writers living in Iceland, will stay and who will leave. Who will become the frustrated lunatic, and who will hide their otherness behind the expertise in Icelandic history and language? Who will quit? I’m on the verge of leaving.

It’s not a threat. Not a trump card I’m trying to play here, like I play my immigrant and Polish cards when it comes to commissioned jobs and cultural grants. I mean it. At times, I consider leaving, because I’ve started to think about what is best for me. I stopped wondering if I’m good enough to exist in Iceland, or if I will ever fit in here. I want to write, to share, to create, and if I ever have to leave in order to keep doing so, I will leave.

Yet, before it comes to that, I would like to offer you one possible theory. I’m still shy about it, still proving it, so I am about as confident sharing it with you as I’d be explaining the memory of water theory at a scientific

dinner party. You know what I mean: the water taking its shape from *its* previous experience...Whatever. Please bear with me. What I'm trying to say, is that, maybe, there are some laws in nature, in society, and in that arts that we are not fully aware of. You never know, right?

For a few years now, I have been studying the new local species: immigrant writers. I've been examining and analysing us, like a child exploring her own body. Touching, poking, pulling, and rubbing different parts of who we are. Yes, most of the time, it's felt very nice. Since last year, I have interviewed over twenty local immigrant writers. To understand the nature of this bread, I've also examined the lookalikes: literary intellectuals, editors, translators, and linguists—all foreign-born, all living here. I made it because the Icelandic government paid me to do it. The glory of *listamannalaun*, the Artists' Salary Fund! As I belong to this species, I was able to ask intimate questions. I made observations and collected evidence. They trust me simply because in cases like ours, those two facts—that we are immigrants and that we are writers—work like social superglue. I pulled their tongues out, analysed the soft skin behind their ears. And now, I'm ready to present my hypothesis:

What if a defeated writer is the best type of writer?

Ethically, I mean.

What if humbled authors, whose backgrounds are—quoting Kristín Hansdóttir—“difficulties in life”, and who write in spite of all the adversity of their circumstances, who speak up despite being different, alien—are exactly the voices we

need, the only ones we can trust?

Who will offer us more insight into humanity than a narrator with a defeated ego?

We were here. It's a fact. I've published a book here. Jakub and Helen have both published three. Elías has published a few. Mazen was longlisted for the International Booker Prize. Joachim's book won a translation prize. Natasha's book won an Icelandic literary prize. Angela has brought so many poems, texts, and books to light. Meg. Francesca. Elena. Mao. Juan. Jordi. Ana. Deepa. Piotr. Berenika. Katie. Margrét. Giti. Vilia-Tuulia. Luciano. Beth. Sofie. Oliver....I can go on and on.

Am I the first immigrant to publish in Iceland? No, I'm not. But it might be that I'm the first Polish woman living in Iceland to publish a book here and stage a play. I don't carry a knife with me, but I carve my name in paper, day by day. I shake every hand that is there to greet me. These hands that touch make me feel my own skin, my body—still warm and firm, still alive, still here, since for now, we have some time left together.

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, there were more than twenty published authors of foreign origin living in Iceland. We are a historical fact, verifiable, well-documented. Whatever tomorrow will bring—we were here.

