• Steph Kretowicz - Iceland

"We have pain on the brain Mr Herzog."
Mix: 'Dreams That Money Can Buy'

The people clap with purpose in Iceland. At least at LungA they do. It's a festival for young artists set up in a town of less than 700 people with a name that I can't pronounce, which is bound by deep-green mountains tipped with glaciers that fissure into roaring summer streams. From far away they seem static; like fractured streaks of ash suspended in time but in reality they're always moving, melting, disappearing.

The landscape of Seyðisfjörður, in the east of the island, half an hour's flight out of Reykjavík and a short drive upward out of Skaftfell, looks less like nature and more like a high-def simulation of how you'd imagine nature to be. The air is so clean it almost hurts to breathe and it's only when the morning mist dulls an otherwise razor sharp picture of pastel-coloured Swiss chalets built

• All Images - Iceand, courtesy the author

with English corrugated iron that it feels real.

It's my first day at LungA and my second of what would be three in the same clothes. WOW Air lost my luggage and I'm sweating in the steam of warm bodies sheltered from the autumn cold in a quaint red schoolhouse. Set along the only road east of the town's eponymous fjord and running towards the Norwegian Sea, Ásthildur Ákadóttir is playing John Cage on a grand piano wearing a crushed velvet dress. Her dark brown hair is fine and slightly tangled and her fingertips are all 'bap, bap, bap, bap' on a grand piano keyboard. Its notes are accented by the shy clunk of its hammers hitting strings. 'Music for Marcel Duchamp' winds up, down and sideways across a tempo that swivels around the same central point; as much as it tries to break through its own composition the piece just tenses around a nucleus that relaxes into a perpetual spiral motion and dies. It's a score written by the avant-garde composer for Duchamp's segment in Hans Richter's 1947 surrealist film, *Dreams That Money Can Buy* where a man named Joe/Narcissus sells bespoke fantasies from a mirror in his bedroom. It's music made in response to the Dadaist artist's two-dimensional rotoreliefs; discs designed for a turntable that spins at a steady speed creating the illusion of depth.

I'm pressed up against the only door of the music room while a slow trickle of late-comers gently push past into the crowded knot of long limbs and hair in various states of dishevelment. There's a girl sketching the scene in an A4 Moleskin notebook in a corner. A convoy of black motorcycles roll across the white frame of a far window weeping with condensation, their direction determined by a narrow distant road. Ásthildur is sitting back from her completed Cage score sheet, her sustain pedal holding down the echo of wound-down wire thuds as the soundboard resonates with low and heavy notes to finish. Thirty-six hours ago I was still in London and now here I am at the edge of the world trying to stay present while framed by a forest of tall Nordic figures wrapped in raw woollen knitwear, themselves dwarfed by the great green waves of eroded and eroding mountains outside. The final note fades. People clap. The applause begins half haphazardly before quickly leaping into a vigorous tempo and then oscillating out. I awkwardly hug my iPhone and try to act casual.

"@claudiacukrov In reykjavik. they lost my luggage and a couple with a crying baby are sitting next to me on the bus. SURPRISE. 1:27 a.m. Wed, Jul 17."

I delete the text as soon as I tweet it, worried that Guðmundur – as in, the kind-of-curt LungA organiser I haven't met yet – would somehow see it and take it as an insult. I don't have data on my iPhone but Iceland has loads and the Flybus from Keflavík airport to Reykjavík BSI Bus Terminal has free wi-fi in exchange for the £18 (3500 ISK) return ticket. I've already printed out a Google map and decided to walk to Ívar's house where I'll stay the night on a blow-up mattress in his lounge room before flying out to Skaftfell the following day. The baby crying next to me doesn't stop for the full 45-minute journey and even Forest Swords' 'Thor's Stone' can't block it out. The song's an English music producer's impression of Nordic mythology that plays soundtrack to my Australian-born, London-based expat of Polish-descent perspective on Iceland. It's played on repeat and heard through my headphones the whole week. But right now even at full volume the low rumble of a sample that's probably meant to replicate some kind of Viking horn can't compete with the up-down motion of a stressed-out dad rocking his screaming child to a shake. It's as difficult to ignore as the knowledge that I'm far too poor to be here.

At Seyðisfjörður, I spend most of my time alone and in my bedroom, on the first floor of a woman's house whose name I don't know and who never locks the door. Her wi-fi keeps me tethered to a tense back-and-forth with a difficult email interview with an artist in New York. He's a Gulf-born fake capitalist with com-

munist sentiments and for once he's being honest about his Marxist ideology but also pedantic about the final text to publish in the process. The cut-up folk vocals of 'Thor's Stone' are as urgent as the unfinished work, panning between earphones and ebbing on a swooning flute melody. It's punctuated by the just-too-short inserts of what are more firm handclaps and I wonder whether this guy knows what he's on about. The hard-edged fragments of applause resemble the group response to almost every LungA performance. There's the clattering, squeaking buzz of the 'Soup with Ellipsis and Rectangles' score from a junkyard orchestra of self made instruments made from dumpster-dived household appliances in the light-blue church: (CLAP. clap. CLAP. clap. CLAP. clap. CLAP. clap. CLAP.) Or the site-specific 'Art Walk' performance where a familiar fellow festival member prances around on a grass islet in the nude at the centre of the freezing fjord's harbour: (CLAP. clap. CLAP. clap. CLAP. clap. CLAP. clap. CLAP.) The camera phones are out in no time.

Ásthildur is still bashing out a bounding 'cla-crunk, cla-crunk, cla-crunk, cla-crunk' of chords that discharge in a slack metallic crash as the damper loosens around its quivering wires. The song ends and the next one starts when Ásthildur stands up and plunges her fingers into the bowels of her grand piano, plucking at its strings and gently sweeping a metal brush across its soundboard. She's reading from a hand drawn graphic composition crudely scrawled on a crumpled piece of paper. That's after introducing its Icelandic author within an English sentence for the sake of multilingual audience that includes Norwegians, Finns, Danes, Swedes. I can't hear through the Old Norse preaspirations and trills though, as her phonology is so alien to me it almost doesn't exist. Ásthildur fills me in on names via Gmail months later, adding to a loop back to that present future-past where she announces, "it was written by ["Gunnar Gunnsteinsson"]. It's called ["Vél nr. 1 (world-premiere)"]". Ásthildur says something else in Icelandic. Everyone laughs and I don't know why.

"Maybe I put that accent on when I'm pretending to be a stupid person", says a Norwegian called Tarjei (temporarily Icelandicised to Þorgeir) about his occasional slip into United States intonations in English. He's the resident creep who most people avoid and I only realise why after already clicking '🐦 Follow'. Þorgeir is a volunteer but the LungA organisers don't remember inviting him and I wonder what his deal is when he stands extra-close to film the performance by Brjósk in his oversized off-white jumper and bulging bumbag. The two women are singing soft harmonies in Icelandic and playing pretty songs to classical guitars in yoke design sweaters. Another woman on clarinet punctuates the tumbling stringed melodies and "woo-oohs" with a breathy sigh, while a plastic melodica winds an eccentric tonal ribbon around it. The audience braves the wet film of light rain in front of them or huddle in the undercover corners of a wooden makeshift radio station behind. Wolf FM's founding flags are fluttering in the breeze at the centre of a treeless light-green field that spreads out between the mountains and the fishing harbour where a ferry is moored for the night. Brjósk introduce a song in English as 'Peace of Mind' and it's a fingerpicked frolic across a light-hearted love song sharing intimate feelings in an idyllic setting as it coos "*the beauty of it all / lies before my eyes*". The sky starts to rumble, one of the singers says, "Uh oh, there's a storm coming".

Þorgier is sitting next to me in the town hall and finishing my lunch. His oily hair flops across his shoulders as he says he hates his North American cousin and he's always had Australian housemates. That explains his uncannily Antipodean accent; it's a familiar inflection distinguished from the other artists of the Nordic Passport Union I meet whose speech is decidedly of 'The States'. Funnelled through the North Atlantic via US military interests, it's an accent almost impeccably reproduced across the three generations since the bilateral defense agreement and an English version of The Sugarcubes' 'Ammæli', become 'Birthday'. It's a song from 1987 that

would be played on John Peel's radio show that same year, introducing its post-punk-circa -The Cure-aesthetic and the famously athletic vocal folds of Björk to the rest of the West. The region would henceforth turn its gaze towards the creative, natural, economic, technological potential of Iceland in data centres and disaster relief.

"These people brought down Iceland by spending all their money on crap". Curver is joking but he speaks the truth in an artist talk in the LungA theatre. He renamed himself after the 'creative plastics' manufacturing brand via an art funded advertising campaign asking the Icelandic public to respect a switch that the Naming Committee wouldn't. Now it's 'Curver'; as in 'Curver Benelux BV'; as in the 'European Plastic Group'; as in the Dutch company; as in the Israeli-owned Dutch company. Curver references Puff "Diddy" Daddy and Snoop Lion as fellow name-changers, screens a video of his 'Sliceland' Puffin-pizza performance-installation and consistently reminds everyone of the genius of Adam Sandler: "*Little Nicky* is a good one".

"Then there is the last piece. It is by Olivier Messiaen," announces Ásthildur, still in the clammy warmth of the schoolhouse and about to perform the fourth movement contemplating the Virgin Mary of the French Roman Catholic composer's twenty *Vingt Regards*. "It's about the baby Jesus", she prefaces. Everyone laughs again and this time the joke is in English and I think I get it. The authority of the Evangelical Lutheran faith is as symbolic as the Expressionist sceptre of Reykjavík's Hallgrímskirkja church is imposing. Its pixel curves rise like props from the *Metropolis* film set and play testament to tyranny as a still government-supported result of the violent Danish Reformation. The relics of a recent Pagan past that lasted until 1000 years 'After Death' still surfaces in the garden elf of a modest backyard and the local 'street art' of a few witch-like figures captioned by a Runic alphabet on a Seyðisfjörður mural. On one walk home past the church a strangely ceremonial eve-

ning mass ends with a handful of worshippers lining the stairs outside its entrance singing 'Ferðalok (Ég er kominn heim)' – 'Arrival (I'm back)' – a capella. It's a deity-free homage to Nature Herself, its allusions to the *"winter leaves"* and *"glacier on fire"* ebbing through a rock a bye ballad where it's the earth, not god, that will *"shield and give protection to young life"*.

It's at the 'Lunch Beat' in the week that the clapping (and my over-coded fixation on it) really reaches fever pitch at the mid-afternoon. An Olof Dreijer remix of Sudanese child soldier-cum-hip hop performer and political activist Emmanuel Jal's 'Kuar' marches on a juddering beat that climbs towards crescendo on a 'CLAP. clap. CLAP. clap. CLAP. clap. CLAP. CLAP. CLAP. CLAP. CLAP.' &c. The high-pitched female holler that opens Jal's contribution to a global campaign for Sudan's first vote in 24 years, 'Kuar', tears through the intended and incidental soundscape as a mass of gyrating Nordic bodies converge at the front of the Seyðisfjörður town hall-cum-improvised LungA canteen. An English-speaking insert eulogises the *"kids carrying guns and welding heavy spears"* of a childhood lived through war, as the oddly Bacchanalian scene turns with the tempo in the click and cut glitch of The Chemical Brothers' 'Electronic Battle Weapon 8'. An elbowed cup of coffee goes flying from its holder's hand and the food – spread out by a brawny, pink-skinned woman with runes tattooed up her forearm – is still spread across the long table on the far wall as the room heats up.

The 21-hour days are surprisingly nice rather than annoying in Iceland. It's still bright at midnight and the skylight in my room looks out across a wall of creviced rock and moss framing a sign that spells 'SEYÐISFJÖRÐUR' in wood. Sometimes a foggy ceiling hangs so low it touches the text's top and it feels like the screen of stone behind it is an endless scroll. There are roughly 320,000 people in Iceland and it seems like the entirety of its proportionately interconnected and incestuous art population is at

Seyðisfjörður. For a person outside of that there's a particular sense of isolation and vulnerability that you also feel when walking through the mountains there. It's a space that's as still as it is alive. If you listen through the white noise of high-altitude air rushing through your ears you can almost hear the songs that soar deep into the vast synthetic canyons that Icelandic electronic producers are so good at simulating. The white dome of a slowly melting glacier arches over the cold rush of water eroding it from a stream, while gulls circle high up on a cliff face and the faraway sight of shaggy-haired wild goats running horizontally across almost vertical inclines become confused with the soft thud of their too-distant hooves. My senses get mixed up here and my fight-or-flight impulse is scrambled in the ominous unmoving beauty of the horizon-less surroundings that both stretch out and swallow you whole. Lying on a moss mattress, Ásthildur's rendition of Morton Feldman's minimal 'Intermission 6' runs through my mind. I consider the freshly cracked boulders, bigger than my head, dotting the green ledge around me and the occasional faint rumble of them falling; the unsteady clink of Feldman's piano keys are brief but of consequence – the silent gaps as profound as their short crests of sound. I take a photo of the view through my feet for Aimee.

"I find that Icelandic people are so dark," says an unknown US journalist out loud, just outside the Seyðisfjörður gallery that features an exhibition of artworks anonymously contributed by locals and scattered with some bizarre depictions of scenes drawn by the hands of what look like children. There's a crude sketch of a family devouring a corpse and a speech-bubble spelling out what translates to "EAT GRANDPA, EAT". The journalist's local guide answers it's hard to "get lost in the swarm" in a country as small as this one, so the retreat becomes the retreat into the self. If the pitch-black performance of two artists dressed in gas masks and skulking on stage to the doom-y rumble of a synthesiser keyboard before blending and then drinking actual

goat hearts hanging from a theatre ceiling is anything to go by, apparently it's weird in there.

"This is some tourist shit", Hrafnkell says bitterly, pointing to what was once a fishing port but is now a series of posh restaurants across from Aurora Reykjavík, where instead of seeing the Northern Lights themselves I can see some simulations of them through the glass of a museum. We'd spent the evening of the closing LungA live concert together in a defunct fish factory of Seyðisfjörður and Hrafnkell and Hrefna agreed to show me around Reykjavík on my last day in Iceland. There I wash in the sulphur smelling thermal shower of the cheapest hostel in the city before visiting the Perlan Dome hot water storage space. It's built next to the billowing steam of an artificial geyser that's bordered by shrubs and a single metal chain where tourists take photos and carry on. I meet my friends on the main street leading down from the Hallgrímskirkja church and spend the evening in Hrafnkell's basement listening to Icelandic dance music. Above the crunchy thud of GusGus' 'Over' from an album called *Arabian Horse*, Hrefna tells me her last music festival was evacuated during a severe storm, while Hrafnkell Facebook messages his mum *"… with the wind, this will blow/ this will blow over"*.

Hrefna loathingly explains *krútt* music to me too; the un-translateable term for the equally naïve and precocious vibe of sickly sweet folk-pop from a generation of artists that seemed to define Iceland's new millennium across Emilíana Torrini, Of Monsters and Men and one of Ásthildur's early teen bands with her sister Jófríður, Pascal Pinon. The twins have since moved on, as has Iceland's music press evidently. Because between the *Grapevine*'s pages on Werner Herzog's first visit to an Iceland of high inflation and Cod Wars in the "shithole" 70s, invectives against the destructive effects of the foreign-owned aluminium industry and a report on the cancerous potential of thermal energy, there's a review of an album by a band called Grúska Babúska that warns, "grown up people should avoid". According

to the *Grapevine* this is another example of how Iceland's *krútt* scene shifted from being a musical alternative, running through aggressive mainstream homogeneity, and ended up as "a clichéd consumerist lifestyle choice used to hawk everything from mobile phone networks to glacier tours".

My last night in Iceland is spent with Hrefna and Hrafnkell at a pub in Reykjavík where everyone to them is familiar. I buy booze that's swiped for by the bar tenders on a debit card that I think is maxed out and talk to a girl who's about to start studying geophysics and works as an adventure tour guide part-time with Hrefna's dad. She tells me you can literally see the Arctic ice caps melting and if anything's going to halt it we have to stop it all. Flying. Driving. Drinking. I point to our beers and look across with a smile mitigated by a sigh. She gives me a shrug in return. "There's really nothing we can do".

(This is an excerpt from Kretowicz's book, Somewhere I've Never Been, to be published by Penny-Ante Editions in 2015.)