GONE VIKING

A TRAVEL SAGA

BILL ARNOTT

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A Travel Saga

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To all who go a-viking.

And Deb. My destination.

If you set out on a journey, pray the road is long.

—Zbigniew Herbert, *Journey*

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Prologue

Sculls slice the bay, the softest splash in morning calm. Each stroke of oar swirls water into quotes, grasping at a poem, the reach and pull a heartbeat.

“They do that on the Rideau,” someone says.

A coxswain barks instructions. The boats move on, silent, save for an oarlock creak and gentle ripple of wake. Through this a bald eagle flies close enough to hear feathers moving air while at a sculpture park it states, “When you see an eagle, you know this is a special place.”

Last time I was this taken by the view it was nighttime. Winter Olympics were here. And we met new friends at the rowing club pub, facing this stretch of water that resembles a thumb on the mitt of the inlet. Large windows and a patio look onto Vancouver’s Coal Harbour, cruise ship terminal and the industrial port’s towering cranes. An Olympic cauldron anchored the scene, a pyramid of metallic beams crisscrossed into outsize kindling – a signal beacon, burning proud. The fiery glow dampened city lights, leaving only flame visible dancing on dark water, the look of a Viking funeral.

Introduction

Of the gladdest moments in life, methinks, is the departure upon a distant journey into unknown lands.

—Richard Francis Burton, *Zanzibar*

VIKING

My journey begins with a pint. Another pub on a pier, this time seated on a timber dock. Sun's glazing the water, surrounding me in radiance like I'm seated in a forge. Inspiring setting, beautiful day. And I'm formulating a travel plan, a trail north, east and west, envisioning waves and ice and mountains. The scene blurs at the edge like cloud – a winding path, romantically ambiguous. I think of the Far North and shiver. Why leave this idyllic spot to trek some of the world's most inhospitable places? I ask myself this more than once, the one-word answer invariably the same … viking.

Through translation and time the word's come to label a people, a capitalized noun outside Scandinavia. But the word was first used *by* those people, describing the pursuit of wealth or land – legacy-building quests, known as going a-viking, or simply to go viking. It was a Grand Tour before rail or the Renaissance, an overseas experience without synthetic packs or Swiss Army knives. Just wool and fur, wood and iron, axes as tools and weapons along with the power of sail, oar and effort. Instead of photos or journals, mementoes were gold and silver, ivory, amber and slaves – by trade or simply taken. At times, plunder, ransom and butchered bodies. Going viking was a rite of passage, a drive as strong as a nomad's pull to migrate. Riches from abroad meant power, and the ability to write one's saga – tales of conquest and bravery – the result, immortality.

Another pint and my plan takes shape – a trailhead at least, pointing me on my way. The journey, after all, being about departure as much as anything. A sense of discovery. Saxons called it wanderjahre, the equivalent of a student's gap year – travel prior to settling down –

education on the road in lieu of a structured workplace. This excursion, evolving as I go, will be my wanderjahre. Multiple trips over several years in fact, but a wander all the same – viking in its truest sense, my trail a personal saga.

PARTIAL RECALL

I was little. Maybe six. And I was a Viking. My tunic was a gunny sack, something you'd use for a picnic race but turned around like a garbage bag poncho – head- and arm-holes cut in the sackcloth. The waist was belted with a length of cord. I had a papier-mâché helmet with horns, a round shield and short sword – light wood wrapped in tinfoil. The overall look was pretty good as I recall.

We were a ragtag army, about fifteen people similarly attired, marching down Main Street as part of Vernon, B.C.'s Winter Carnival – next to Quebec City's, Canada's largest. The parade route was a good long march given the length of my legs at the time, a mile or so through the centre of town. We shook our swords and howled at spectators, threatening pillage, none of which I understood. But I found the loosely organized chaos great fun, particularly yelling at strangers, a thoroughly enjoyable activity I plan to reprise in old age.

A few decades later I'm a Viking again, having joined my nieces for Halloween trick-or-treating near their Vancouver home. I'm no longer part of an army but a solitary Norseman, feeling out of place on a warm afternoon. My outfit's a far cry from my childhood gunny sack. This one was purchased at a costume shop: leggings, tunic, boots and belt, and a faux fur cape that looks like an earthen bathmat.

My weapon of choice this time around is a copy of *Mjolnir*, the massive war hammer Thor used to make thunder, or Gene Simmons spat fire from with a bellowed, "God of thunder, and rock n' ro-oh-oll!" It's undoubtedly the best part of my ensemble. Once more I'm crowned in a horned helmet but plastic, not papier-mâché. It would be a few more years of museums and research before I'd learn horned helmets never really existed – just something made up by an Austrian costume-designer to accompany Wagner's stage performance of *Flight of the Valkyries* in the 1800s – the Viking-inspired music kept alive by American soldiers, the visual image by Looney Tunes.

Although not a cartoon, art on our wall reminds me of that animation in its spectrum of colour – vibrancy that stimulates like children's TV. It's a piece of reclaimed wood the colour of Arabica coffee. Stain deepens the wood's natural grain, adding richness to the rectangular slab, and it's been painted, in a manner. An explosive rainbow obliterates the wood – a shotgun of paint from close range. Colours could pass for Rorschach spatter. Until eyes focus.

There is in fact familiarity in the seeming mess – shapes recognizable from study and repetition: the Americas, Canada bleeding into Greenland, icy blue. Africa, lush and green, melts through the Middle East into Asia. Europe grasps the Mediterranean, squeezing out droplets of yellow and white and the pink of every salmon. Oceania's a constellation, spilling into the Indian and Pacific, the water a sparkle of candy and coral.

It's a globe, the world laid flat on old wood, a mish-mash of paint on scrap. One thing becomes another – alchemy – the map an interpretation of what's there. "And sometimes the map *is* the territory," Rebecca Solnit notes in *Wanderlust*, which I know to be true. I travel that imagined space constantly. This time, however, I'm going for real.

Land’s End

It was drizzling and mysterious at the beginning of our journey. I could see that it was all going to be one big saga of the mist.

—Jack Kerouac, *On The Road*

DEPARTURE

I’m on an Airbus. UK bound. I’ve left work for a couple of months, mentally flipping a sign on my nonexistent shopfront: not *gone to lunch or gone fishing*, but rather *gone viking*, as that’s literally what I’m doing, not knowing what my journey will bring beyond adventure. I’m rereading Neil Oliver’s *Vikings*, the book sitting oddly on my lap. It’s become a wedge from a spilled red wine fiasco and is now a bloated, mottled burgundy and sickly bruised yellow. It appears injured, both physically and emotionally. The author stares sternly from the back cover, looking hurt as well. Maybe a tad judgmental. But it’s taken on character – the dried wine almost bloody. I peel open pages as though it’s a treasure map and plot my course, the book serving as research. Plagiarism comes to mind but I let it go, remembering something I read about George Harrison, who said every songwriter uses other people’s material. “Good writers borrow,” he said. “*Great* writers steal.” So with the intention of being not only good but *great*, I set about memorizing Oliver’s text.

After a while I check our progress. We’re currently over Greenland. According to adventurer W. Hodding Carter, “This has got to be the worst place in the world,” his perspective as he sailed the south coast in freezing squalls. But after landing he writes, “Ashore, Greenland is like a birthday present given half a year early – surprising, delightful, and wondrous.” A touch Dickensian in a best-of-times/worst-of-times kind of way but he clearly captures the fluctuating mood and enthusiasm that accompanies exploration.

I remember this flight path from my youth, glancing out a window to the Arctic Ocean, confused by angular cloud shapes only to realize they were

icebergs far below. Saint Brendan was down there, somewhere in the sixth century, bobbing in his ox-hide boat when he saw his first iceberg, describing it as “a floating crystal castle.” And when Tim Severin replicated Brendan’s odyssey he noted, “Sea ice is never still.” A piece of planet meandering with the elements, a loosely plotted journey. I feel the same way.

When I next check our bearings we’re skirting the Arctic Circle. Like Brendan and Severin, we’ll get there when it’s time. And within a few moments Greenland and Iceland are behind us, for now. Together with Deb on this leg of the excursion, my viking voyage is underway, around the UK and beyond. Ragged geography, rich in history – Britons, Celts, Picts, Normans, Angles, Saxons and Danes – Viking blood a dripping timeline, leading us toward the unknown.

LONDON TO READING

It’s dark and rainy. Too cold for spring. Heathrow’s behind us and we’re in Reading – brick and sandstone Victorian architecture offsetting bland post-war low-rises. Red double-deckers and black cabs remind us we’re in the UK. Rain gradually eases, sun pierces nimbus and a pedestrian mall fills with families eating ice cream in bright cold, making the most of a bank holiday weekend.

Nestled between the Thames and Kennet rivers, Reading sits just west of London. It officially began at the time of the Viking Age, making it a fitting start to our saga – my peripatetic pursuit of Norsemen. I feel like a hunter, tracking footprints and anthropological scat, my quarry running through lineage across the British Isles, North Africa, the Mediterranean, the Mid-East, Russia and most of Europe. During the eighth to eleventh centuries – the Golden Age of Vikings – Scandinavian exploration and trade spanned the globe, and I intend to follow that trail wherever it leads. Joseph Conrad’s Marlow puts it well in *Heart of Darkness*: “When I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, ‘When I grow up I will go there.’”

Despite officially beginning in the Viking Age, Reading was already on the map, here when Romans arrived to do their thing – build roads, tax, and rename stuff. It was Readingas, named for the local Anglo-Saxon tribe, until corrected to Readingum. By the late ninth century, however, this place was Danish, run by Scandinavians travelling to and from London like present-day commuters. The fabulously named Sweyn (Sven) Forkbeard – King of Denmark and Norway, established a local supply post for inland raiding, and from here Danes invaded Wessex, defeating King Ethelred and his brother Alfred in 871 at the Battle of Reading. This began the Danelaw, when Vikings ruled England.

Crossing a downtown park we stroll to Reading Museum, which brought me here for two reasons. Firstly, the Thames Water Collection – a permanent exhibit featuring eclectic items pulled from the murky non-tidal Thames (from Gloucestershire to London) – ten thousand years of artifacts retrieved from the river, everything from rubbish to treasure and offerings to long-forgotten gods. The highlight is assorted Bronze and Iron Age weaponry, including a Viking longsword. How it wound up in the Thames is anyone's guess. The blacksmith's handiwork is evident in the hammered iron blade. How did this sword affect history – in how it was or *wasn't* used? Somewhere in the forged metal and pommeled grip we're left to fill in the story, a weapon from the water, like the Lady of the Lake relinquishing Excalibur.

The second reason I'm here is the Bayeux Tapestry, depicting William of Normandy's invasion and victory at Hastings in 1066. The original was woven in the eleventh century, a remarkable creation *seventy meters* in length. The Reading replica is the only duplicate, a sprawling one-page woolen history book painstakingly recreated using identical wools, dyes and stiches. It wraps around the inside of the purpose-built gallery, recounting the lead-up to the invasion – England's King Edward and the usual confusion over the throne being promised to multiple people, in this instance local brother-in-law Harold as well as William from across the Channel (or *la Manche* if you're looking this direction), culminating in the Battle of Hastings.

After the museum we explore the town, admiring Town Hall Square, Forbury Gardens and the Maiwand Lion. We pass Saint Laurence Church and Reading Abbey ruins along the way. It was here Henry VIII, officially

done with abbeys, had the last pesky abbot hung, drawn and quartered – a grisly but thorough process. Hung, for obvious reasons. Drawn, as painting was expensive. And quartering simplified portioning, like chicken at Swiss Chalet. I admit some of this I infer.

We're only here overnight, the layover a pleasant break to the long train trip from London to St Ives and a fitting first milestone on our viking trail. I find a piece of Reading tourist literature stating, "Few towns are less prepossessing at first glance than Reading … but few towns better repay exploration." In other words, it looks like shit but there's plenty here, honest.

The day winds down as fatigue and jet lag set in. We fashion a takeaway from Marks and Spencer food hall and I find a bottle of Old Peculier, a favourite beer that's impossible to get in Canada. The brewery's sponsoring a crime-mystery writing contest with winning stories printed on each bottle. The catch? Stories can only be ten words in length. The one on my bottle reads, "Picked off one by one. Four, three, two … it's you!" Which I like but feel I can do better. So I write my own: *Jurors know his guilt. And he theirs. He smiles. Free.*

READING TO ST IVES

This morning feels like proper springtime – church bells, sunshine and birdsong. The station looks abandoned as we board a long, empty train to ride across Somerset, Dorset and Devon to Cornwall, the southwest toe of the country. A grating lurch rolls us out of town into pastoral scenery – canals with barge-boats, stone bridges, old trees and swathes of canola, bright as a field of canaries. I eat a soft white sandwich with excessive mayonnaise and little food value, shortening life in an agreeable way. Bill Bryson describes this seemingly endless train ride as "like rigor mortis with scenery." Which blurs as the train gains speed, passing sheep and cows, muted greens, and a line of brick homes, uniform as houses on a Monopoly board. Fluffy cumulus hangs in place as we race by, the feeling of flight. More brick buildings, tile roofs and churches in chunky architectural cubes. Horses graze in paddocks and two kestrels hover near the ground, poised in the hunt.

A door connecting cars slides open, gusting chill air. We stop briefly at a sad, empty station, stained roof and walls like a derelict barn, and pass

shallow, open railcars resembling open mouths awaiting cargo. As we rumble west with a southerly lilt a conductor's voice comes on the PA, "Next stop, thirty minutes." I nap for the uninterrupted half-hour then wake to a ticket-taker coming through the car.

"Any tickets for Westbury?" he asks, armed with that 150-year-old piece of rail technology – the handheld hole-punch. Piercing paper – *ca-chunk* – somehow makes it official. Your ticket's been punched, as they say. *Actually* getting punched would be more definitive, not necessarily a body-blow but something conclusive – face or crotch. Which brings to mind a self-defence course I took – a blend of combat jujitsu and krav maga – mostly eye-gouging and testicle work, fighting dirty with frightening quickness and no remorse. I learned, I feel, enough to get myself very badly beaten up. And was reminded of this at the station food court where a guy with an eyepatch was making pizza. I wondered how he lost the eye. Were the slices too pointy and he'd carelessly run with them like scissors? Or had he too taken the dangerously empowering combat course and mistakenly picked a fight with someone who had the same training – his opponent now sporting an eyepatch on the offsetting side.

It's worth noting the eyepatch-wearing pizza man was a dead ringer for Kirk Douglas's character Einar, son of Ragnar, from the 1958 film *The Vikings*. Kirk, or rather Einar, lost his eye too. Not in an ill-advised fight with an equally trained opponent, nor from foolhardily running with scissors or pointy pizza but rather by pissing off Tony Curtis, adorned in sexy slave-wear (eighth-century Nordic summer collection), who rather than fighting simply sicced his falcon on Kirk with the less than subtle command, "Kill!" Tough to argue *that* in a court of law:

(Judge) "Did you know your falcon was trained to kill?"

(Tony) "Ah, no, Your Honour."

(Judge) "And when you screamed, 'Kill!' to the falcon as he flew toward Mr. Douglas, I mean, Einar?"

(Tony) "Oh, *that*. Well, you see, Your Honour, that's just the bird's name, see, and I was, uh, trying to call him back, you know?"

But Kirk didn't so much lose an eye as gain a rakish patch. Tony, however, couldn't convince the movie judge of his innocence and was sentenced to endure crabs at high tide; not the venereal disease but

literally being tied to the base of a wharf piling at rising tide, watching as carnivorous crabs crept in, hoping to not be eaten alive. (Spoiler alert: he's not.)

Jostled from my reverie as we round a curve, I see we're approaching Exeter, and read in a guidebook, "the town was stormed by the Danes in 876." Just south of the rail line is a monstrous cathedral – twelfth-century Norman construction, an imposing castle-like block. In the tenth century Athelstan, the Anglo-Saxon king, did his best to clean up this town, ridding Exeter of Cornish-Britons. While the cathedral was being built William of Malmesbury wrote fondly of the efficient expulsion, "Exeter was cleansed of its defilement by wiping out that filthy race." Ah yes, no more filthy Cornish with their odd speech and vegetables in pastry.

Athelstan's Anglo-Saxons took over the British villas, formerly Roman, and inside the city walls just past the cathedral this quarter's still known as "Little Britain." And I imagine the exodus, all those BBC characters evicted from *Little Britain*, a sad line marching west: Vicky Pollard, Andy Pipkin and Lou, Daffyd, Anne with her scribbles in excrement, Carol Beer, Bubbles DeVere in the nude, Lady Emily Howard, dietician Margery Dawes, Sebastian Love, and a squabbling Dudley and Ting Tong. Once more I'm forced to add detail.

Beyond Exeter our train shimmies along a sandy stretch of shore and the sweeping instrumental theme from *Coast* fills my head, my thoughts becoming a Nick Crane narrative, that wondrous BBC metre that makes everything said (up-tempo inflect) magically sound … (pause and enunciate) *worth hearing*.

At St Erth we transfer to a scenic branch line skirting the Cornish Riviera, swathes of gold beach and windblown marram dunes fronting St Ives Bay, a mingling of North Atlantic, Celtic Sea and Bristol Channel. In describing this stretch of Cornish coast, author Dora Russell writes, "Nowhere better than down here can one feel the mysterious link between man and the whole of his planet down to the very substance of its rocky foundations. Here I have my share in eternity."

Our train arrives at St Ives around midday under threatening sky. From the station we walk a jagged route along beach and cobble streets into town. A maypole dance is taking place just off the foreshore, the familiar music played by a brass band with an oompah sound. Children skip and weave ribbons in a twisting rainbow. I remember doing that as a child and wonder if every kid forced to participate since it began in the Middle Ages has felt equally stupid.

Six-hundred-year-old St Ia Church looms in thick stone, an imposing welcome to the quaint fishing village. It's from St Ia the town gets its name, phonetically morphed from Cornish. Why some saintly places and people are emphatically spelled St, or St., while others are Saint, I don't understand and no longer question, just accept. Which is the case with our Viking pursuits – diverse research with different translations. Names are only one example – Leif Ericson/Erikson/Eriksson/Eiriksson, all more or less correct. At times original language makes sense, other times Anglicizing adds consistency. This fluidity of language – forever blending, changing, I find fitting with our journey across countries and cultures, like crossing evolving frontiers.

We meander through St Ives, eating pasties and winding a myriad of undulating medieval streets. Higgledy-piggledy best describes the spider-webs and rabbit-warrens of narrow roads and alleyways. We buy crab sandwiches for supper and eventually make our way to an apartment called The Lighthouse, our home for now.

Skylights brighten the top floor of the unit, placed between thick beams in a vaulted ceiling. Windows are peppered with spindrift and gull shit, the seabirds' call a perpetual score – cries the sound of yowling cats, wailing babies and screeching baboons. I find comfort in the cacophony. Songbirds chirp springtime melodies – music offsetting the gulls' babble. I notice a herring gull on a nest of mottled moss, a green-brown blister on the sloped slate roof next door. The bird stands and picks at the moss, revealing three eggs the deep stony colour of malachite.

Our bedroom features a solid wood beam over the lintel and exposed rockwork walls – large, rough stones, heavily mortared. And the walls, I notice, are gently crumbling. Tiny piles of fine, sandy rock litter the floor and windowsill. Outside, sun sets and a storm grows under starless sky. Wind gusts, shushes gulls, and blows the day aside.

ST IVES

A morning stroll around St Ives: church bells, trilling songbirds and the call of jackdaws, a tree-muted pocket of silence in Trewyn Gardens, and a Black Lab chasing rocks in a tide pool while gulls look on, a blend of caution and disdain. Shopkeepers clean iron-rich guano resembling smashed eggs and workers paint weather-beaten storefronts. On one side of town is St Ives headland, called The Island, even though it's mainland. While north of us lies Mainland Island. An island called mainland, and mainland called an island. It doesn't have to make sense to be the way it is.

Intense wind picks up – fifty miles-per-hour gusting to sixty. Tide's out, fishing boats and dories askew in the bay. Determined tourists shiver in shorts, eating ice cream that doesn't melt in the cold while thirsty punters huddle at picnic tables – the patio-cum-beer-garden of St Ives' Sloop Inn, circa 1312.

Despite the cold, summer's approaching and the St Ives Literature Festival is underway, melding art and music. I attend as many performances as possible, strolling to Norway Square (imagining a Nordic nod) for open air shows – poetry readings, musicians and singers. It's friendly, inclusive – a folksy embrace in cozy spaces. Performers squeeze between buildings, laneways and ancient stone fences with sea views, surrounded by eclectic Gulf Stream flora – windblown evergreens, fragrant jasmine and squat furry palms. We enjoy original readings from modern bards, acoustic versions of Bob Marley, The Beatles, and Bob Devereux songs I magically sing but didn't know I knew:

In the Morris rooms together

In the lamplight on the sofa

We make such a charming picture

We should stay this way

We visit the Maritime Museum and Tate Gallery, both with sweeping water views, and hike the Coastal Path, windswept cliffs and yawning river mouths, sandy beaches and steep grassy dunes. A high point on the path features a former lookout used to spot pilchard schools and direct fishing boats. Seining involved three boats pulling a net between them, harvesting hogsheads of mature sardines for consumers in Italy. St Ives

pilchard fishery boomed for two hundred years around the Industrial Revolution. No different than when Romans were in residence, demanding fish paste for legionnaires from here to Hadrian's Wall. The oily smell of pressed pilchard was purported to hang for miles along the coast. Now, this open-walled shelter called Baulking House feels like a lonely fort atop the bay, an inviting eyrie for isolated contemplation.

Methods have changed but St Ives remains a fishing village. St Ia Church shares honour with St Andrew, patron saint of fishermen, while the tiny stone church of St Nicholas, patron saint of sailors, crowns the headland. The eighteenth-century John Smeaton–designed pier is still in use, featuring his signature cupola-adorned octagonal lighthouse. But more recently St Ives has become an artists' Mecca. Northern exposure, radiant sand and tourmaline water make it a painter's dream. Journalist Sarah Lyall notes, "The moodiness makes for lovely landscape painting, but the sun's failure to rise all the way in the sky brings on a natural melancholy." Desolation indeed accompanies much of the work, perhaps a function of harsh weather in exposed terrain. Violent storms are part of the experience.

In the late sixteenth century two ships from the Spanish Armada blew in, taking shelter from high gales. They fell prisoner to Walter Raleigh – privateer, soldier, explorer and politician, a sailor akin to Francis Drake. But unlike Drake, who died rather adventurously in the Caribbean, Raleigh ultimately fell from favour and went under the executioner's axe. Apparently he snapped at the axe-man to "Strike and get on with it." Chop, chop, you could say. Perhaps not as exotic as Drake's demise, but a damn fine exit-line, properly masculine and action-hero worthy. My favourite Raleigh-ism, however, is his quote, "Talking much is a sign of vanity, for the one who is lavish with words is cheap in deeds," which I find a deliciously verbose way of stating, "Say less, do more."

NORTH CORNWALL

We're picked up for a private tour of the north Cornish coast, and Russ, our driver-guide, keeps us informed with relaxed easy humour. Born and raised in West Cornwall, he has good local knowledge of history, flora, fauna and generations of regional prejudice. At our first stop Russ runs into childhood friends, his accent reverting to incomprehensible – a Gaelic

mouthful of marbles. Only when he returns to the vehicle, safely out of earshot of buddies, does his garbled slang settle back to something resembling English.

Well into a two-hour drive the meditative hum of tires on asphalt replaces conversation. Scenery slips by: wind turbines, solar farms and stone smokestacks on abandoned tin mines. We drive through Camborne and Redruth, the heart of the now dead mining industry. Poet Simon Armitage walked this way on the Coast Path, describing what we see: “Chimneys stand as monuments to long-gone heavy industries, but through their roots the gloomy heathers and drab grasses seem to tap into the region’s soot-blackened history.”

A short distance ahead views change radically. A pheasant wings over purple thrift and swans drift on the River Camel, its shore hedged in buttery-flowered gorse, the estuary heaped in golden dunes. Squint and it could be the Sahara. Padstow sits at the river mouth, another Viking touchstone, site of Danish raids in 981. Beyond the bay lies the dreaded Doom Bar – shifting sand shoals that’ve claimed hundreds of ships. We carry on past a string of villages – some old and pretty, others new and functional – every one small and inviting. Light plays on fields – bunched carpets of green, bucolic pasture and crumbled stone fencing, exuding wispy mysticism. In *My Love Affair with England*, Susan Toth defines this West Country as “myth, legend, and the land of faeries.”

In Delabole, buildings resemble children’s blackboards I saw in a museum – writing slates like heavy black notepads. We pass two foxes on the road, bringing to mind Steve Martin and Dan Aykroyd, the wild-and-crazy guys perpetually on the hunt for American *fox-es*. But these are ordinary English ones, squished beyond recognition – almost – heads intact, bodies smeared flat and bloody like horribly made fox-skin rugs.

Eventually we arrive at our destination – Tintagel. When Norman Vikings arrived they built a fortification atop a crumbling Dark Age foundation. The site was chosen not only for location but for history and symbolism. This is home to the Duke of Cornwall, heir to the English throne (or one of them, anyway). But perhaps most importantly, it was King Arthur’s castle.

Building remnants hang on clifftops, spread over a series of natural rock walls. Views are remarkable, wind incessant, a haunting, lonely place

despite tour groups and tittering schoolkids. Arthur's legend clings as determinedly to this site as building stones in the bedrock. It's the ruins beneath the ruins that bring me here. Under the crumbling Norman structure is the sixth-century castle of a Cornish lord, the man on whom the legend of King Arthur is based. Probably. If there was an Arthur, this was almost certainly his home.

Despite the tourist traps touting the nearby town as Camelot, I let myself get swept away. *Excalibur* (1981) was my favourite movie. Only by watching it again years later did I appreciate the cast: a baby-faced Liam Neeson, Patrick Stewart with hair, and an alluring Helen Mirren. The way I see it, if half the world finds truth in some version of a bible, I can believe in this place, my faith placing King Arthur squarely in the middle, albeit at a table that's round.

We spend time exploring, climbing cliffs and squinting at windy sea views through stony walls and lookouts. Braying goats graze on sheer terraces, narrow paddies planted with Glosette turds. From precipitous stairs we scramble over grass and rock to avoid clumps of French schoolchildren, as annoying and unavoidable as the goat droppings. Feeling Russ and Deb's boredom, I drag myself away, wondering which stone held Excalibur.

From Tintagel we carry on to Port Isaac, the seaside town with a split personality – best known as Port Wenn, home of Martin Clunes' BBC series *Doc Martin*. And while it's not quite as exciting as my pilgrimage to Arthur's castle, I'm happy to join the blue-rinse crowd and gawp my way through this idyllic Cornish village, comfortably familiar from TV. A brief stroll through town and we make our way to the beach. Tide's out. Two massive sea-break walls enclose the harbour. Behind us, the village creeps up compact slopes, spreading east and west, while on one side a wide granite cave rises from the shore, dark and ominous. I expect a giant to peer out any moment.

We walk back to our vehicle on narrow streets of lime-washed buildings. On each side of the road buildings creep together as they rise, each successive floor larger than the one below. Russ chuckles, relaying stories of tall vehicles getting stuck fast as drivers don't look up. Even when he picked us up his van nearly jammed in the tight space behind our unit, a lane called Rope Walk.

After fish and chips we head back to St Ives, a leisurely route combining motorway with winding coastal roads. Every tiny village requires navigation, Russ easing the van through slender laneways with multipoint turns and backing up to facilitate oncoming cars. I'm glad I'm not driving. Passing architecture offers snapshots of geology – buildings of the stone they rest on, a shift from slate to granite. Outside Hayle and Lelant gannets smash into surf on Carbis Bay. We're struck with vehicular cabin fever – too long in the car – and have Russ drop us on the outskirts of St Ives. With thanks and pleasantries, we part ways and finish on foot. It's the end of the business day, and on High Street bakers shout, "Loaves half price! Pasties, two for a pound!"

PENWITH PENINSULA

The weather forecast's bleak but for now it's sunny and clear. Our day with Russ was fun enough to do it again. Once more he picks us up in his van but today we're going the other way, exploring West Cornwall and the Penwith Peninsula.

In *Rising Ground*, Philip Marsden writes, "The Penwith Peninsula is to Cornwall what Cornwall is to the rest of England – a loosely connected appendage stuffed with the residue of thousands of stories and mythical projections. Every rock, every hill and cliff has its tales, lore and sprites." And Denys Val Baker, founder of the *Cornish Review,* adds, "It is not just a place, it is a mysterious place."

The undulating road we're following hugs the coast through paddocks of horses, cows, scrubby gorse and freshly cut hay. Marsden further describes the area: "Heading west through Cornwall is like walking the plank, a feeling made more acute by the mounting realization that, as the sea approaches, you are also nearing some ritual arena, a testing ground for the great mysteries, an antechamber to a place that remains always just out of reach."

We park by a chapel in Zennor and cross the road to hike through moors to the "testing ground" of a six-thousand-year-old Neolithic quoit. The stone chamber was constructed two thousand years *before* the Pyramids or Stonehenge. The building itself is simple, the engineering mind-boggling – impossibly heavy rock slabs leaned together like a giant house

of cards, roofed with more plank-like stone. We peer inside the entrance and Russ squeezes in. He says he sees a mitten.

“You mean midden,” I say, referring to an archeological refuse site.

“No, a mitten,” he says. “Someone’s dropped one.”

From the quoit (file *that* away for Scrabble), we traipse through fragrant yellow gorse – a tropical smell of coconut and ripened peach – and past swathes of gunnera, giant rhubarb-looking plants that leave you feeling miniscule and prehistoric, then into bracken and heather. We spot collared-doves and pheasants – their chortling cry the sound of a hunt. Buzzards soar overhead, disconcerting when you’re far from anything. There’s the faint sound of roosters and a cuckoo – nature’s wake-up calls. Small drab birds fly by.

“What are those?” I ask Russ.

“LBJs,” he replies.

“What’re LBJs?”

“Little brown jobs,” he says with a smile.

In waist-high foliage we graze on wild sorrel and thin leeks. The sorrel tastes of Granny Smith apples, the leek exactly like leek. We scramble around more stone slabs stacked like massive fencing and layered piles of rock resembling crude buildings, leaving us to wonder how many were just that – windbreaks and shelters from six millennia ago?

The moors roll unassumingly – just a bit further you think, maybe over that next rise, an alluring pull from everything. I understand Conan Doyle casting the Baskervilles in this land and can’t imagine *not* getting lost in the dark. In *The Moor: A Journey into the English Wilderness*, William Atkins writes, “moorland was ill-omened, sombrous, dreary … a place of discarded symbols. It was wind strong enough to make a bull kneel. It was rainfall measured in the height of children. It was where you went to hide.” Moor’s Anglo-Saxon for fen, marsh and other waste – midden in its wettest, grittiest sense. And again in the words of Atkins, “the moors are a barrier as impassable, and as unforgiving, as the Atlantic or outer space.” Hiking this desolate terrain I never dreamed I’d have so much in common with English sailors or Buzz Aldrin.

Over another rise of soft earth, mossy mud and high grass we spot the home of Aleister Crowley – the ceremonial magician, poet and occultist who formed his own religion early in the twentieth century. Labelled a Satanist, he positioned himself as his faith's prophet, as you do, and lived here like a less well-financed L. Ron Hubbard. "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law," Crowley wrote, epitomizing his dark religion. Needless to say he indulged in scads of sex and drugs. Every photo of him is scary – just a man looking into the camera, black-and-white and frightening. The fact he warranted a biographical song by Ozzy Osbourne tells you all you need to know.

The land surrounding Crowley's bleak home offers expansive views of patchwork fields and deep blue sea. From here we head back around boulders through thick greenery, having to backtrack as we lose the path, before making our way once more to Zennor. After coffee we carry on along the coast, driving through Pendeen and stopping for pasties at St Just.

"All inbred here," Russ mutters and I'm not sure if he means the town, Cornwall, or England. (Later I learn each community has its own derogatory label for neighbouring villagers: inbreds, cave-dwellers, scaly-backs, and cunts.)

Munching our pasties and littering the floor of the van with flaky pastry shards, we enjoy nature through open windows: seagulls on water, ravens in gorse, and another hovering kestrel finding its own gamey lunch. Leaving the main road we snake our way to Cape Cornwall, park, and walk to Ballowall Barrow – a Bronze Age funerary cairn – a circular stone burial chamber. From above it looks like a round maze.

On seaside slopes we spot red-billed, black Cornish choughs and I admit I'm chuffed to see them. These coastal birds are on the Cornish coat of arms and were thought extinct just a few years ago. From the clifftop we see a basking shark prowl the water far below. The towering dorsal and tailfin split the water a shivering distance apart, the twenty-five-foot monster defining its moniker, slowly gliding through the bay. To the west are sandy beaches framed with granite cliffs, pummelled by heaving waves. The furthest point is Land's End – dreamy in its blend of finality and open-endedness. In Cornish Kernewek it's Pedn an Wlas, the headland Romans called Belerion. Beyond lies Lyonesse – fabled

Arthurian stronghold, also thought to be Atlantis, submerged as ocean levels rose. Where we stand, the nearest rock is bathed in sunlight, looking rusty – streaked with iron – ore that forged the Viking Age.

From the cape we drive toward setting sun. Cloud descends at the surfers' beach of Sennen Cove: thatch roofs, Victorian capstan, a boathouse for the RNLI (Royal National Lifeboat Institution), stacked crab pots and beached pilot gigs – an unpolished seaside town. We end our sightseeing across the peninsula at Porthcurno and The Minack, an amphitheatre on the south coast. Like the castle at Tintagel, the theatre hangs spectacularly from a cliff, sea thrashing rugged shore far below. Ben Kingsley made a film set in the Dark Ages – time of King Arthur, a scene from which could be here at The Minack, the way it is now – stage and surroundings timeless. We sit on a cliff edge and gaze east, the curve of the bay glowing amber as sun drops behind us, softening hues both relaxing and rejuvenating.

Approaching St Ives we again ask Russ to drop us at the edge of town so we can walk home. Parting ways I comment on the view – the attractiveness of town. To which Russ replies, "St Ives. She's a bit of a bimbo." Then pauses before adding, "Very pretty, but not much depth."

ZENNOR

The Tinners Arms is a thirteenth-century pub in Zennor, a few miles from St Ives, starting point for our hike through the moors. The Coast Path joining these towns is treacherous in foul weather and previously, on a violently windy day, I crawled as far as I dared before turning back, knees locked, clutching at clumps of grass on the cliff. This time, I'm taking a bus.

I squeeze aboard at the terminal and we loop through St Ives. The bus stops again and more people jam in – an abundance of heavy clothing and gray hair – all pensioners. No one pays but me. I wonder how the fares work but don't care enough to learn, and simply drop a handful of coins into the little receptacle. We take a sharp corner and clip something with a bang, a stone wall I believe. The bus shudders, passengers give a collective, "Oooh!" but our driver doesn't slow, carrying on and winding us through lumpy pastures with glimpses of sea and unending moorland.

In *Walking Home: A Poet's Journey*, Armitage writes of being in a moor's uttermost centre, calling it "a place of Wordsworthian 'visionary dreariness' – where dreariness was so absolute that it constituted nothing less than a form of the sublime." Which is what I feel on this bus ride – the blissful simplicity of repetition in unchanging landscape. Then again I may be seizing the quote to reference Wordsworth without having to slog through his poems like the marshy walks he and his sister were so fond of. The fact is, the memory of trying to hike this swath of coast and being forced back weighs on me. It shouldn't have been so hard but it was – jumbled emotions, genuine concern for my safety, and vertiginous fear. As the bus sways I go back to that day.

I passed a pleasant blend of sandy beach to start, pavement and cobbles undulating on steep hillside. Wildflowers burst with spring enthusiasm: daisies, heather, bluebell, hogweed and speedwell in pink, mauve, yellow, white and blue. On the water, cormorants bobbed and dove in late afternoon. On the trail, magpies, blackbirds and chaffinches were busy and indifferent to my presence. Jackdaws swooped with herring gulls while gannets plunged from dizzying heights, seeming suicidal. I marched with confidence round the headland west of St Ives. Behind me town ran up a wide grassy hill like a picnic blanket, a cemetery fronting the sea – pastoral resting places, achingly beautiful. I'd be content, I felt, with that permanent view.

I traipsed over rough rock, mud and burbling water high above the sea. Cliffs fell away at my feet. My stomach tightened as fierce wind lashed, pushed and pulled and I found myself leaning inland, walking at an angle, bending knees, convincing myself my fear was irrational, knowing it wasn't. It was too windy to be there, far from town and far from safe, but beauty pulled me on.

I fought my knees' desire to lock, wanting to simply hunker down and hope to be saved. A setting sun lit the coast and violent sea. Breakers exploded into froth far below. There was nowhere else I'd rather be and I desperately wanted to be elsewhere. The head of a seal broke the surface like a dark cone, took a breath, and dove. I could just make out split flippers as it swam into deepening shades of green.

I forced myself to move, to turn around and inch my way back in the wind, clutching clumps of bunchgrass, hoping they'd hold. A rabbit

hopped down the trail. Two ravens sat on a chunk of granite. Songbirds flitted through windswept heather. I spotted the crumbled walls of what looked like a small castle on the cliff. I broke through nettles, enduring needle-like pokes to see it up close. I peered over the precipice and my groin plummeted with the land. I crept back, welcoming the nettle's stabs. Now I know it's one of many long-abandoned tin mines, tall stone engine-housings that dot the Cornish coast like haunting sentinels.

I return to the present with a sigh as the bus stops at Zennor. From the stop – a bend in the road – I go toward the water and walk a stretch of Coast Path toward Pendeen, regretting not having completed the trek from St Ives despite knowing it might have killed me. But today is pleasant, just windy, not high gale force, and I meet a few decrepit-looking seniors who've just completed the same stretch that rebuffed me previously, sending me creeping home, tail between my shaking legs. One old guy admits it was terrifying and he's now going to get, as he explains, very drunk. Okay, I think. Some honesty. Another acquaintance I know who attempted this part of the Coast Path broke down in tears, vowing to never return.

Now an old man stooped into the wind, colossal tinsel-strand of snot dangling from his nose, marches past in a bee-line from the trail to the pub. "It was nothing," he lies, snot swinging like a metronome, and carries on, small rucksack, plastic poncho, and an ever lengthening appendage glistening from his nose.

Inside the medieval pub, leaning against a soaked old bar towel I get my pint, a warm, house-brewed ale the colour of copper. The exposed beam ceiling is low, the patrons few, a mix of locals and travellers, and I relax on a bench in the warmth of a peaty log fire. The barmaid brings me soup and bread, the whole experience superb. I glance at my watch, which I'd rather not do, but there's only one bus back.

It so happens I'm a magnet for weirdos. Don't ask why. Just accept it, as I do. And of course a weirdo approaches and asks to join me for lunch. I recognize him from the trail – the snot strand with an old hiker attached. Somehow I managed to beat him here. Mercifully his nose companion has vanished. Perhaps they had a disagreement and the snot carried on alone.

I'd read the term hatchet-faced, liking the description but never believing such a trait truly existed. Until now. A man can indeed have a

face like a hatchet. You could split wood with this fellow's visage. I indicate a chair by my bench with a welcoming gesture. He settles in, also likely thinking, "Why am I always stuck by the weirdo?" However, we're both solitary travellers and a little human interaction is welcome, particularly when there's an accessible exit.

It turns out we have a great deal in common. He's a hiker and writer, documenting his adventures and the people he meets, a modern-day Chaucer. This comes up after a bit of mundane small talk, to which I promise to improve my end of the conversation.

"If not," I say, "You may need to make me sound more interesting."

"Oh, without a doubt," he says.

His name is John Taylor. I can't help but think that if this is the same John Taylor who played bass for Duran Duran he's aged extremely poorly. Likening his adventures to Chaucer, John's titling his work *Taylor's Cornwall Tales*, and explains that he's doing the South West Coast Path in its entirety. Like many hikers he's breaking it up over multiple summers but fewer than most, his annual mileage substantial.

"My wife goes and spends time with her sister and I do this for a few weeks," he explains. "Then we meet back up in the Midlands." He's travelling cheap and as light as possible – a small rucksack with partial change of clothes, journal and a few toiletries. "At my age I need to keep everything as light as possible. I can't carry a heavy pack anymore. I even broke my toothbrush so it's smaller."

"Like Mr. Bean!" I say, referencing the episode where he packs a tiny case, cuts trousers into shorts and debates cutting his Teddy Bear in two for compactness. Bean also breaks his toothbrush, just like my new ~~weirdo~~ friend.

I have a second pint but my lunch mate's done, explaining one is his indulgent expenditure for the day. He won't eat again until tomorrow, overnighting in the local hostel which includes breakfast, and fill up on food then. We wish each other well and head in separate directions.

It's now mid-afternoon and there's a small group of us on the narrow road awaiting the last bus of the day. There's a few tourist/travellers, people walking one way on the trail, going back on the bus, or others who've come here to see the pub and Zennor's Wayside Museum – a tidy

exhibit of life here since the Stone Age. There's a display of Neolithic grinders – ancient mortars and pestles, this being a fertile area with a five-thousand-year history of growing and grinding grain. A creek flows through, powering a water wheel, and nineteenth-century Trewey Mill still makes artisanal flours from spelt. ("How's *that* spelt?" you might ask, trying to be witty, to which I'd say, "Try harder.")

The rest of those boarding the last bus are tipsy pensioners going back to St Ives or carrying on to Penzance. They've all had a couple at the Tinners and are now getting silly, horsing around on the ride home.

"Let's sit in the back and act like we're young," one fellow says to the lady next to him.

"You're about seventy years too late for that!" she replies.

He turns to me, "Did you hear what she said?!"

I tell him I did.

"And what did *you* do when *you* were young?" he asks.

"Fuck you" comes to mind as I forget I'm a middle-aged man, as all middle-aged men do. But instead I say, "Oh, recite sonnets. You know. Highbrow stuff." Why this pops out I can't imagine. Maybe being in the English countryside with people who were around in Shakespeare's day.

"Oh well, us country bumpkins," he says, "we only got out two, three times a year. So we had to make the most of it."

I nod understanding, we laugh, and spend the rest of the ride in silent nostalgia.

BACK IN ST IVES

It's market day. This usually takes place at the Guild Hall, but a national election's underway. The Hall's now a polling station so vendors have relocated to the backpackers' hostel, giving us an opportunity to nose around the facilities. The hostel's unremarkable but the market's fun. We load up on local cheese: Treloar, Brie, Yarg and smoked Stilton – eight pounds of cheese. The price, not the weight. Calorically speaking, it may be eight pounds in weight soon enough. Leaving, we pass an Anglican Cathedral – the local Church of England – while across the street's a Celtic cross, a nod to a pagan past. Bridged beliefs unifying a nation. A

poignant visual, as this election decides Britain's participation in the European Union.

The day turns blustery. Southwesterlies vanish and wind and drizzle push from the north. We don rain gear and train to Lelant Saltings, where sea salt was once extracted from Lelant-Hayle estuary. From the station we connect with the Coast Path for a five-mile walk. The trail is tamped sand – gold flecked with black, bordered in flowering gorse, bluebells and wild daisies. Snails share the path, clinging to shrubbery while empty shells litter the ground in swirls of earthen tones, the occasional *crunch* underfoot. We traipse atop grassy dunes with sea views, Godrevy Lighthouse in the distance. This scene inspired Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and I like the fact we're traversing back to our own Lighthouse. Although influenced here, Woolf set her story on the Isle of Skye, where we'll be soon enough – tidy bookends within our journey. We cross Porthmeor Beach, St Nicholas chapel defiant in the wind. Beachcombing, we find cuttlebone, mussels, limpets and smooth little slabs of slate like tiny roof tiles, ideal for skimming in frothy waves.

We spend our twenty-first anniversary on the Coast Path, crossing marbled gold sand on The Towans – Carbis Bay to Lelant, Woolf's lighthouse on the horizon. Summering here as a child she claimed, "I could fill pages remembering one thing after another. All together made the summer at St Ives the best beginning to life imaginable." Although more midway than beginning, I understand. In Lelant we lunch on a deck at Scarlet's Wine Bar, pairing snacks with local gin and strong red beer from St Agnes. Back at St Ives we dine on duck as sunset gilds the bay and British property shows mumble on TV. I reread Sue Lewington's *A Day in St Ives* while gulls imitate Jonathan Livingston, soaring in gloaming over pulsing sea.

A leisurely Sunday concludes the week – an uninspired photo exhibit at the Tate but good views and coffee at the rooftop café. There's another literary event at Norway Square – song, poetry and spoken word – talented, passionate artists – great fun despite the feeling I'm in a Christopher Guest mockumentary. We follow this up with a curry and Agatha Christie on BBC. I spend time corresponding, wondering if anyone cares, paring photos of explorations so far.

PENZANCE, NEWLYN AND MOUSEHOLE

We're reconnecting with the Coast Path, going from St Ives to Penzance. Along the way waves batter rocks, throwing foam high in the air, the visual something from a TV show – *Fierce Nature: The Terrifying Sea* or something similar, narrated by David Attenborough of course. The thread of land we're traversing has attracted voyagers for millennia – Mycenaeans, Phoenicians, Romans – following the Stone Age they came for Cornish tin and copper, the makings of bronze. Then came the Iron Age and Vikings, until Spain assumed the role of marauders-du-jour in the late Middle Ages.

At Penzance we follow shoreline in the direction of Newlyn and Mousehole. The smell of wood fires seep from homes, making everything cozy and welcoming. We cross the Ross swing bridge and pass the Art Deco Jubilee pool, built to commemorate King George V. The triangular concrete structure's on a point of headland, built to cut crashing waves like a ship's bow. Further on the promenade sit the Battery Rocks where Henry VIII built a Barbican, fortified with bronze cannon to deter Spanish raiders. Ironically the Spaniards stole the cannon, possibly to the sound of *yoink*! The battery was replenished for the Napoleonic wars and again in WWII, the English managing to keep the new artillery out of French and German hands.

The town's placement is pleasantly scenic. Its streetscape, however, has deteriorated. Bill Bryson writes, "Penzance ought to be fabulous. It has a superlative setting overlooking the island castle of St Michael's Mount, surely one of the most romantic views in England. It has a long and agreeable promenade and a harbour that could be lovely with a bit of paint and imagination and perhaps one or two sticks of dynamite."

We pass through Penzance's wherry town – ferries from days of olde. There's a petrified forest just offshore, visible at low spring tide. The Deep Sea Fishermen's Mission sits near the pier, overlooking the lighthouse and Newlyn docks, one of England's busiest fishing ports. It's famous for crab, and may be the finest we've eaten. Artists come here too, the northerly light akin to that of St Ives.

St Michael's Mount is a rocky pyramid sitting in the bay. Where we are it aligns with Newlyn Lighthouse – a postcard view through salt air. A

local book describes the Mount as “one of those rare and singular objects which impresses the mind with sensations of veneration, pleasure and astonishment the instant it is seen.” Previously we’d come here from there, having explored the Mount castle and grounds with a steep climb and panoramas. St Michael’s, like Normandy’s Mont Saint-Michel, reflects pagan-Christian transition, power and propaganda the binding agents. St Michael was a dragon-slayer, same as Saint George. Whether there’s different versions or multiple dragons, I can’t say. Point being these places, pilgrimage destinations, resonate with spirituality. Last time we walked from the Mount to Penzance in the sea – three miles of soft sand in warm ocean water – bare feet with pants rolled up. It was our own pilgrimage, like every trekker on St Michael’s Way or the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, route and destination a seamless prayer.

From Fore Street we intersect the Coast Path – Newlyn to Mousehole, stopping at Penlee Lifeboat Station Memorial, where volunteer rescuers died trying to save others in December 1981, heroic efforts and tragic loss. Just up the road is Mousehole, famous for its Christmas lights, which every year are turned off for one hour in remembrance of Penlee. When all is dark, a cross and angel remain lit, gleaming on the harbour.

Poet Dylan Thomas called Mousehole the prettiest village in England. It’s our destination for today. From Newlyn the road follows a rise beside the sea. The town lies beyond, nestled in a rocky hollow, where the Knights of Saint John landed on their return from the Holy Land Crusades. Our first visit here we came the other way, hiking in from Lamorna Cove. Along the path we saw Druidic stone circles and a real pirate pub, a no-questions-asked rendezvous locale for smugglers. Everything here still strikes me as a nautical fairy-tale. I imagine the smell of pine tar and old port sounds – groaning sheets and billowing sailcloth, the roll of barrels on gangplanks, cursing and shouts of pidgin – a soundtrack to adventure. But our quest today’s simply lunch with a view. We find a café on a rocky promontory with a deck painted roughly in blue and settle in to eat fresh crab while boats chug by on sun-crested sea.

Coastal Paths

I like Cornwall very much. It is not England.

—D. H. Lawrence

ST IVES TO PLYMOUTH

A calm, seaside morning. The scent of baking bread lingers in lanes. A waft of garbage and the ocean. Workers unload a palette onto a dolly. A gull's opening a sealed box on the sidewalk, removing tape, the package labeled, "Delivery – From Spain." I'm impressed, not only by the bird's adeptness but its penchant for Iberian imports. No doubt a pleasant change from bivalves and chips off the beach and from bins. A stone and asphalt path leads around the Arts Club, a high-walled old building hanging over the foreshore with a prominent sign. Someone's managed to climb up and remove the "t" so it reads, "Ars Club." Bums in seats, I suppose.

From the Ars Club we make our way to St Ives station. Today we head east. Weaving between buildings we spy harbour views with sparkling sun on teal-blue. A three-masted schooner cuts through the bay. Gulls wheel offshore while pigeons coo from unseen nooks. Plopping down on a sunny bench we wait for the train in quiet, save for the birds and the sea, and I let this view seep in, a sense of memory in the present.

Eventually the train whistle pierces the daydream. We climb aboard, adjust packs, and a prompt ride rolls past scenery that's now a part of us. After a change at St Erth we ride Cornwall's spine for a stretch, dipping past boats and tide flats into neighbouring Devon. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* notes the Battle of Hingston Down took place just north of here in 838, when King Egbert of Wessex defeated an army from Cornwall. Cornish forces included Danish Norsemen – Vikings wading into local fights, blurring sides and keeping things pleasingly convoluted. Our viking trail continues.

PLYMOUTH

Too often I've trained past Plymouth without stopping – the bridge over the Tamar offering lofty views of bight and Barbican – rich history just beyond reach. But not this time. Far below, the river resembles muddy tea. Heavy working ships and jaunty pleasure craft are moored in tidy rows. The view's familiar, details new. This time when the train stops we disembark, descending a platform to the past.

Drake, Cook, Nelson, the Mayflower, Vikings – persecuted, prosecuted, seekers of asylum or wealth – all viking in their way, came to or from Plymouth, one of the world's great harbours. The city sits between river mouths of the Plym and Tamar – a former Roman trading post, still Western Europe's largest naval base. En route from St Ives to Brixham, we're treating it as a layover, a historical scavenger hunt. Twenty-four hours of touchstones, checking off maritime players like performers on a playbill.

Doctor John Huxham wrote of Plymouth, "The town of Plymouth is situated at the Bottom of a very large Bay, lying quite open to the southerly Winds; on the East and West it is sheltered by very high Cliffs, at the Bottom it is terminated by Marble-Rocks, yet so as that an Arm of the Sea runs up a great Way into the Country on each Side of it … From the Bottom of the Bay the Country rises continually till you come to the Dartmoor Mountains at about ten Miles distant from the Town. – I have therefore described the Situation of the Town, that, amongst other Things, some Reason perhaps may be assigned why there falls such a Quantity of Rain here yearly." Huxham reminds us Plymouth is a sailors' town – windy, rainy, hidden yet exposed.

We arrive at midday in early summer warmth. Harbour winds swirl cloud, pulsing sunlight on the city. It's a modest-sized town but the biggest for miles. Everything of note happens here – a concert stop for big touring acts, shows disproportionate to the community, its location drawing people from across Cornwall and Devon. There's good energy, a vibrancy that lets you know it's more than a place that used to be.

From the station we follow paved paths with bold signs, a pedestrian-friendly town centre. I've plotted an itinerary starting at the Hoe, a swath of high land facing Sutton Harbour – a blend of park and open-air museum. A Royal Navy destroyer patrols the bay. Smeaton's Tower, a discombobulating inland lighthouse, anchors the sea-side park like a thick

red Christmas tree. Drake's statue tops a rise, chest puffed, distinctly Napoleonic. And across the grassy expanse sits Viking Rock, erected to memorialize Danish raids here in 997. The steep rocky bay's an intimidating landing, an ugly climb from shore over rough terraced ground. Viking raiders landing here must've been beyond courageous, or desperate. It wasn't the first time, either. A hundred years earlier King Alfred blockaded Viking ships on the Devon coast a short distance away. More Danes came to join the fight but a storm scattered the fleet and the Vikings were forced to retreat.

The rest of the afternoon we spend walking the Barbican and Elizabethan gardens. We climb the Mayflower Stairs and I explore the Guild Hall – a medieval skyscraper, the most impressive building in town. On Vauxhall Street we pass the home of John Huxham, the doctor who described the town with much capitalization. This is next to where Captain Cook ate before setting sail on the *HMS Endeavour* in 1768. It's a Mexican restaurant, which makes me laugh. I presume it wasn't that when he ate here.

Turns out it was actually a private residence where he was hosted by his friend, the aptly named William Cookworthy, the Quaker who discovered how to make fine porcelain from Cornish china clay. According to the historical plaque his work represented discovering the ancient Chinese secret. And here I'd been mistakenly taught by 1970s TV it was all-temperature Cheer – all Tempa-Cheer.

While Cook set his sights beyond the horizon, Cookworthy looked beneath the land, identifying pentuse and kaolin, the chalky stone he fired into the precious glass-like compound. White was his goal – the purity of all colour, revealed through elimination of that very palette. Cook and Cookworthy, two friends with different goals, alike in ambitious determination.

It wouldn't feel right to visit Plymouth and not drink gin, so we stop for cocktails at Blackfriars, the original Plymouth gin distillery. We settle in for large G-and-Ts in an adjacent lounge under a high sixteenth-century ceiling with rough-hewn timbers braced into an arc like an upturned ship. From the distillery we wander medieval streets on stone cobbles through Tudor construction along sixteenth-century New Street. Then stop to peer into Elizabethan House, now a museum. Each storey increases in size, the

structure an inverted Chichen Itza. Exterior windows scowl. Ghostly energy oozes into the street and I can't help glancing over my shoulder as we walk away, convinced the house is watching. From here we enter a bar and twist down spiralling stairs to a compact dining room – small tables in angled nooks to dine on tapas, pizza and wine, surprised at how much we like this vibrant old town.

Next day, once more in warm sun, we're back on the train, heading east from Plymouth, changing at Newton Abbot and boarding a busy branch line to Torquay. We walk a mile around the blue-green curve of Tor Bay in glinting sun and ocean breeze. Despite this being my first visit there's a familiarity thanks to *Fawlty Towers*. The theme music loops in my head. It's a proper English seaside town, things frozen in time – ice cream, sandcastles, dogs, a Ferris wheel. But there's money too, in places – fresh things, refurbished things, and new construction alongside the old. It's boisterously busy and we're all too happy to board a passenger ferry to rock us across the bay, away from the chaos of Torquay to the comparative quiet of Brixham.

BRIXHAM

The bay's a geode under burning sun as I climb a swaying wooden gangway, navigating cleat, block and tackle to board the *Golden Hind*. Spars creak and sheets groan, casting thin, sweeping shadows like slashing swords. The plank walkway feels like a swinging slide, a test in balance as tide still rocks the beached ship with memories of swell and sail.

Around Brixham's meandering harbour volunteers have assembled museum-quality exhibits – nautical paraphernalia and art, anchors and chains, plaques and photos, nets, traps, floats and buoys. It's attractive and unpolished. The scene blends working port with thriving Devonian community – shops and restaurants, tourist retail, chippers, pubs and pirate bars like the Lusty Wench and the Crown and Anchor, along with stalls on the water selling cockles, whelks, mussels, clams and nasty-looking fish bits in jelly.

William of Orange landed here in 1688 to claim the British crown, safeguarding the country from Papists, and a tercentenary obelisk memorializing him centres the bay. Church bells sound through the day,

ringing from high ground, with a perpetual echo of gulls. Across Tor Bay, snaggletooth cliffs of red sandstone cut a bright swath around the blue of the inlet, while the peaked mound of Thatcher Rock stands offshore like a sentry.

This little town fed the country in the nineteenth century. The Brixham trawler is a wooden sailing vessel, unique and powerful. At a glance it resembles a Chinese junk. One passes the harbour under full sail, orangey-red canvas, like a spectre pulled halfway round the world. In the late 1800s these trawlers were a sizeable fleet. Two hundred Brixham boats fished the rich cod grounds of Iceland, providing food and commerce disproportionate to this community's size. But by the end of the First World War the number of vessels was halved, sunk by German U-boats, and by the Second World War only six remained.

From Brixham we walk on road that narrows to winding dirt trail, meandering into Berry Head National Nature Reserve – windswept headland and plummeting cliffs over charcoal blue sea. A sign reads, "Berry Head: 400 million years in the making." It's a sunny afternoon, pastel sky with high wisps of cirrus. Guillemots on the cliff-face squawk in gossipy cackles. A powerboat cuts a curving wake, something from a Bond film, approaching a villain's lair. Dry grass moves in the wind. The temperature swirls with the breeze, hot then cool. We hike over crumbling brick fortifications, reminders of a threatened, threatening past. Beyond, cliffs drop to the sea in severed chunks like poorly butchered meat. Each step delves us further into geological history. Armitage writes of this landscape, "Roll back the grass and peat, and the hillsides would show their striped profiles: shale/sandstone/limestone/coal – each laid down as successive oceans filled and lingered and drained: mud and sand becoming shale and sandstone, vegetation becoming coal, the bones of sea creatures tamping into limestone."

TORQUAY

A different day, a different direction, walking away from Brixham on the Coast Path, morning sun on our backs. Today we'll do sixteen kilometers or so, following the wide bight of Tor Bay. Sybil Fawlty's along for the hike, a Torquay siren song ringing in my head. ("Basil! Basil!!")

Town eases into pasture and paddock, rocky shoreline and heavily wooded hills. Thickets feel time-frozen, as though Robin's merry men might lay in ambush at any turn. Armitage describes the sensation thusly: "… under the dark green shade, among the twisted trunks and exposed roots, it feels like we're heading deep into one of those enchanted forests of book or film, where a faun might be suddenly glimpsed in a glade or dell, playing his flute, or a herd of centaurs seen cantering through the shadows." Ahead, the trail explodes into an array of identical paths. Tall trees and dim light confuse direction. There's nothing resembling a map and intermittent Google reception can't even locate us. So we head back a kilometer or so, choose a different route and carry on. There's a field with horses, a woodpecker on a branch, a lime kiln, crumbling stone walls and peekaboo sea views. Gradually we come to open foreshore lined in white beach huts with technicolour doorways, quintessential English seaside. There's gigs and rhibs and a nervous flutter of pigeons, the sound of feathery applause.

We pass under high arches hoisting a rail line over a gorge, then hike our way up, around and over the tracks, arriving as the lone steam coach chugs past on a seaside curve, a perfect photo op. Timing's somewhat of a crapshoot and we're lucky to get this view. Weather basks us in rotating sun, wind, cloud and showers – a futile cycle of adding and removing layers – fleece, rainwear, sunscreen, then giving up and accepting damp, sweat and sunburn.

The path leads us through Paignton, the pier a gaudy time capsule – penny arcade, theatre, candy floss, ice cream and doughy fish and chips. In *Channel Shore* Tom Fort writes, "The esplanade is wide and welcoming and cheerful in the slightly vulgar way esplanades need to be." Yes, he's been here, everything garish and bloated – promenade, pier and holidaymakers alike.

Continuing north and east, beach disappears, knifing into a rocky crescent tip. Admiral Nelson moored in this bay, the fleet that defeated the Spanish and French and helped change the world in 1812, the same man that fought Viking descendants at the Battle of Copenhagen, this unassuming locale another historic mile marker.

We climb toward a fork in the motorway. One route descends to Torquay but we continue up, ascending winding road through dense trees toward

the thatched village of Cockington. From the paved surface we find a flowered trail that takes us into the storybook community. It’s old, quaint, well-preserved but real. Enough grit to make it authentic. People live and work beneath the thatch. We settle into a patio tearoom for high tea – a large feast of small food stacked on an outdoor table – very English, and a fun dichotomy to trail mix.

With happy bellies we leave Cockington, the name reminding me of “John, John Cocktoastin” from *Fletch*. The road gradually meanders into Torquay, a bustling span of hills and bay, the permanent Ferris wheel a rotating beacon at the marina. A train station peeps through trees to the sea and twelfth-century Torre Abbey centres the town, dull and out of place. Surrounding grounds, however, are inviting, leafy and park-like, chorused in birdsong. Tor Bay shines across the road, a fat cruise ship wallowing in the harbour, a white whale hinting at oceanic escape. No risk of scurvy, just obesity and Norwalk virus.

Beside the abbey sits the Spanish Barn, where Drake confined Armada sailor-soldiers following their defeat. A plaque reads the Spanish were interned. Not intern the noun (an unpaid worker) but the verb, meaning imprisoned. As it happens, exactly how I felt watching *The Intern*.

We wander the grassy grounds, buy a disappointing sandwich and catch a ferry back to Brixham, closing a jagged loop to end our day at our temporary home. Where I learn that in the early nineteenth century in a nearby cave Father John MacEnery found stone tools and bones, remnants from ancient hunters, mammoths and long extinct fauna. He shared this with no one, the implications undermining Biblical history more than he knew what to do with. Then English headmaster William Pengelly examined the cave and another here in Brixham, revealing equally significant archaeological finds, and in 1859 told the world. Father MacEnery's initial find in the 1820s was well before Darwin sailed from Plymouth aboard *HMS Beagle* in 1831. In other words, groundwork for *The Origin of Species* was already laid, a setting foundation poured here.

KINGSWEAR AND DARTMOUTH

It’s a chilly overcast morning as we shuttle from Brixham to Kingswear, start of the Agatha Christie steam train to her Greenway residence. Our bus bumps over steep fields dotted with sheep, offering glimpses of dark

sea through narrow green valleys. It feels like the end of the line, road and rail truncated by water. We take a foot ferry across the snaking inlet to Dartmouth, water and sky surly gray, rain spattering our boat. In this muddy light it's a gloomy, brooding place and I can't imagine being here in winter. Kingswear, a steep mishmash of new and old buildings, shrinks away as we cross the river. Behind us, rail-line hugs the water and the steam train, trailing a plume of coal smoke, whistles its way from Agatha's place into town. I wonder how many murderers are aboard.

Ahead of us the Royal Naval Academy crowns a hill, the structure stodgy and authoritative. Down the slope, buildings of every colour face the harbour – an eclectic maritime palette, with murky green water and dark ensconcing cliffs. Moored boats rock, nautical flags crisp in the wind. We disembark and climb a crooked path to Dartmouth's High Street, where rainbow houses cling to banks and stone stairs join cliffs with medieval lanes. A wall-eyed, decrepit old pub called The Cherub strikes me as ironic. As in Plymouth's spooky Elizabethan House, each floor extends beyond the lower, the structure leering over the street. Walkways are rough cobbles, worn into ankle-wrenching domes. We browse through town – a fine bookstore, another ancient pub, assorted retail – high-end, low-end, tea shops and chippies, a mix of locals and tourists.

Traipsing away from the village centre we follow a finger of land bordering the long inlet. A trail veers inland, skirting a fjord-like tributary. This is Warfleet Creek (Saxon for stream-fed). Here Royalist forces attacked the town in 1643. A stronghold was established – Paradise Fort – and Dartmouth surrendered. Three years later the Parliamentarians returned in force, ousting the Royalists for good. Ahead on the path lies fifteenth-century Dartmouth castle, the objective of that fighting. The fortification sits on the headland alongside Saint Petroc's church.

Wind shoves rainclouds around, shifting flat monochrome light like pencils in a case – Bs through Hs, finally yawning into blue-white sky. We're back on Coast Path here – castle, church and steep graveyard with headstones leaning toward the river. A paddle-wheeler chugs by, passengered with white-suited gamblers puffing cigars and drawling witticisms, I presume. We saunter back to town, the tangle of streets as confused as the weather. Vehicles speed through the maze of single-lane

roads and I’m dreading driving, which I’ll have to do soon, as trains won’t always be an option.

The footpath bisects Bayard’s Cove Fort on the quay – cannons and thick stone walls. Here’s where Sir Humphrey Gilbert lived, “founder of Newfoundland.” Or at least the one who claimed it for Queen Elizabeth I. To call him founder of course ignores a few millennia of Mi’kmaq and Beothuk, not to mention Saint Brendan’s boatload of Irish monks, Leif Erikson and his siblings, and who knows how many others who didn’t or couldn’t write an account of it. Same as Columbus discovering America. Or my discovering gin and tonic.

This modest inlet’s also where the *Mayflower* anchored for a time while its sailing mate, the pinnace *Speedwell*, foundered and returned home, leaving the whole New World thing to the God- and fun-fearing Puritans from the slightly less leaky *Mayflower*. It’s worth noting Trooper’s *Santa Maria* lyrics work just as well to describe the Pilgrims’ determined, directionless voyage from Plymouth as they do Columbus’s one from Barcelona.

Boarding the ferry back to Kingswear we’re swarmed by pensioners, fussing and impatient as only the retired can be. Although they’re not setting out to find turkey or spice, or to mislabel Indians, our little boatload strikes me as just as ragtag as that of the *Mayflower* or S*anta Maria*. The gray-haired cluster’s crossing the inlet as part of the Agatha Christie experience. I believe she’d quite enjoy knowing her Devonian home’s a macabre pilgrim destination.

BACK IN BRIXHAM

On the Coast Path I think of Paul Theroux being here, writing in *The Kingdom by the Sea*, “To be anonymous and travelling in an interesting place is an intoxication.” Today we hike from Torquay, heading north around the headland to Babbacombe. *Western Lady*, a compact blue and white passenger ferry, trundles us across Tor Bay under morning sun and fat cumulus – fluffy, white-topped clouds with flat, dark bottoms – the look of burned meringues. Water’s choppy green with squalls on the horizon. It’s an agreeable day for tramping and a gannet follows our boat like an omen.

From Torquay we climb, road and trail, our route proffering views of Thatcher Rock, a uniform mound of offshore limestone. A tanker moves in the distance, bisecting the curve of Lyme Bay. Off the road, wildflowers and three-cornered leek add colour and aroma. Pigeons and doves with purple-green heads reflect sun in a sparkle of iridescence. We pass Hope's Nose, a quarry on the peninsular point, over Babbacombe Downs to St Marychurch and Oddicombe Beach with its vibrant red sandstone. Bryson describes this span as "picturesquely sited on a sweep of green hills overlooking a preposterously pretty cove." Cliff Railway, a near-vertical funicular, hangs from the cliff. We choose to go by foot, a calf-straining climb. At the top, a bronze statue of the Baroness Mount-Temple overlooks open water. Preservation of wildlife was her passion. There's a bronze bird on her wrist and fresh red flowers in her hand, reminiscent of Saint Francis of Assisi.

It's time for lunch. No more healthy rations. I've stocked my pack with British candy bars: Double Decker, Caramac, Toffee Crisp and a manly Yorkie bar, its tagline, "It's *not* for girls." I bought this thinking I wouldn't have to share with Deb. But beyond the sexism there's history to the name – made by Rowntree in York, England's Viking capital, the name derived from Celtic – *Eburos*, meaning "place of the yew trees." In 866 it was conquered by Danes, the name modified to Jórvík, and remained that way until Normans simplified it to York. Whether or not it was for girls even then I can't be certain. But the Yorkies from Viking Jórvík ruled northern England – the hub of the Danelaw. Munching my most masculine milk chocolate, crumbs take on new meaning, mini milestones marking our viking trail.

A new day, birdless gray sky pinched into folds like a rain-soaked blanket. Brixham harbour's a rocking pincushion of masts. Britain's nautical flag (red with a cornered Union Jack) flies from working and pleasure craft. The Devonian flag (green with a white cross) waves to Saint Petroc, the West Country saint from Wales, schooled in Ireland, founder of Cornwall's wealthiest monastery. The view of Tor Bay's the same as yesterday but filtered stormy green. William of Orange stares from the centre of town, perched on a plinth, gull on his head. The *Golden Hind*

strains at its moorings, itching to sail. The gangplank creaks, memories of Panamanian gold hauled aboard, replacing iron and cannon balls with the world's most valuable ballast.

Afternoon brings blazing sun and driving rain. I'm soaked and sunburned, an unusual blend of sensations. But turbulent weather subsides, a swing from anger to content, and sunset's pink and vast, illuminating red sandstone. A classical guitarist plays softly next door. When he started I was put off. "Shut up, you hippy," I thought, as usual, then realized it was quite lovely, something I'd pay to hear. Temperature plummets with the sun – too cold for open windows. We seal up our unit and the gentle sound of flamenco fades away.

Our current home is another tightly stacked unit of stairs and small landings. Everything creaks and groans, just like us at the moment, the result of thirteen miles on the trail today – a pleasant half-marathon of walking and climbing, forest, rock and sand, rainbows of beach huts and seaside towns with promenades, stretching piers, arcades and bouncy castles. A far cry from our day in Dartmouth, where the castles don't bounce. They brood.

A sumptuous supper of fish – creamed mackerel with horseradish and herbs. We spread it on bread, crackers, our hands, anything. One of those fish the British love – oily and dense like sardines or pilchards. Cook them forever, they're still moist. Raw, mackerel's beautiful – striped like a tiger, only silvery. Nothing else looks like it. Except tiger.

It was at Harry's Pie Shop in Sydney I had a pie the colour of *actual* tiger – orange and black. It should be noted no food is actually orange and black, other than tiger, and I refuse to eat so much as a bite since my time in Bengal during the Raj (I may've imagined that part). The tiger-coloured pie, one of many on the menu, was lovely to look at and quite inedible. I'd been wanting to eat there for years – everyone's eaten there, like a Vegas steakhouse with fifty years of celebrity photos on the walls. I walked away, toward the water of Woolloomooloo, gagging on my pie and cursing my choice, then thought what the hell, I've waited this long, do it right man! So I lined up for another fifteen minutes and ordered an original – no fancy animal colours this time. I got my second pie and smiled, pleased with my perseverance and happily went on my way, a proud papa heading home from the maternity ward, my baby quite plain to look at but

beautiful in its own way. After a short stroll I took a bite of my new child, which was just as awful as the first, only lacking in colour and character. I sighed, cursed Harry's and every celebrity who pretended to eat there, and returned to our room to fill up on chips and lager.

Next day I do some research, a pleasant alternative to making shit up. Crawling through the belly of Brixham's *Golden Hind*, I read historical plaques and learn of the *Basilikon Doron* – the treatise written by King James (VI of Scotland or I of England, take your pick), letters given to his son Charles early in the 1600s prior to his becoming King Charles I. The writing's essentially a three-section instructional manual: Christianity, ruling as king, and general health and well-being for dummies, or monarchs in this case. The premise is quite endearing – a parent putting down everything you want to impart in your child in a tidily formatted book: part one – be a good Christian, pray and be thankful; part two – don't be a tyrant, be just, foster a market economy, learn math, history and foreign policy, and when you take a spouse, ideally they're of the same religion and loaded; and part three – don't drink or sleep too much, be clean, use plain language, and eat meat (take *that*, vegans). Given the time and author, it's pretty good stuff. There's also an emphasis on finding middle ground and timeless reminders warning against Papists and Puritans. This is the same King James that rewrote the Bible to get it right, and who promoted Protestantism in Ireland, which obviously went very smoothly.

Hunkering on the dusty wood floor in the bowels of the *Hind*, I read the ship's version of James' third part of the *Doron* – good health tips for life aboard ship, written by Richard Madox, Drake's chaplain on an Atlantic voyage in the late sixteenth century, including a pinch of saffron for intestinal disorders and advice to "keep warm, defecate moderately, eat well, and bear it with good courage." So, stiff upper lip (wot-wot) and poop, but not too much, leaving me curious how much defecation one deems moderate.

Further along this low-ceilinged chamber a longsword glints in a small spotlight. It's Drake's sword. Knowing the size of the man this was a formidable weapon, like swinging a cross-country ski. The blade bears the Royal Arms. This was used to knight the man in 1581 and again four hundred years later to knight another Francis, Sir Francis Chichester.

Here’s the historical full circle: Elizabeth I knighted Drake following his circumnavigation of the globe in the sixteenth century. Because Magellan died during his voyage, many consider Drake the first to do it successfully. And four centuries later Elizabeth II did likewise with Chichester, using this same sword, when he too sailed around the world in the 1960s, the first to do so single-handedly. This later Francis offers up another pleasing common thread, for now we go to his namesake, Chichester.

Nearing a restaurant on any given morning you catch wafts of working kitchen, early aromas of daily preparation. Now, moving across the country, my Viking trail’s firming underfoot – path to road, and as with morning kitchens I smell history and myth, rich and savoury, intensifying as we go. Canute the Great, Viking King of England, lies just ahead.

From Brixham we bus to Paignton and train to Westbury en route to Chichester, passing seaside towns on sea-washed sandstone. Bedrock’s ferrous-red. (Would you call that irony?) The train plunges into black tunnels blasted through ocean-side rock, bordered in waves and pasture. Fellow passengers are a cluster of giggling old-timers – the sound of squabbling guillemots, with public school students in jackets and ties, the boys behaving badly. It’s Friday of another long weekend and the train fills, and fills, until we question our money-saving choice to not buy assigned seating. We picnic on our laps, jostled amidst the scrum. I have a badly plugged ear, which mutes everything rather agreeably, provided my good ear’s to a wall, and I settle into an auditory cocoon for this leg of our journey.

Mercian Midlands

What is it that confers the noblest delight? Discovery!

—Robert Moor, *On Trails*

CHICHESTER

A warm day. Buildings are glowing under bright sun and blue sky. Trees, grass and flowers look artificially coloured, the vibrancy of touched-up photos. We're in Chichester, town centre literally marked with an X, North-South-East-West quadrants laid out by Romans two thousand years ago. Now shopping streets, the quarters radiate from a central market cross, or buttercross, unchanged since the Middle Ages. Just beyond the city wall, now an elevated park with grass walkways, lies what's left of the Roman amphitheatre, circa 80 AD. In the ninth century Alfred the Great enhanced this burh – fortified town – with hilltop warning beacons running to London, seventy miles northeast of us. I imagine flames leaping over hills, a fiery messenger bounding cross-country, and once more see Olympic flames and Viking ships burning in the dark.

In the weirdly colourful sunlight we stroll the grounds of the cathedral, founded a thousand years ago, and it strikes me this small pretty town marked its history with indelible stamps every millennium. We walk to and from the buttercross and along the city wall. Shopping streets bustle but grassy space exudes calm. With a venerable cathedral and history seeping everywhere, people in modern attire seem out of place, or time.

Local friends Mark and Louise take us exploring around sprawling Chichester harbour. We make our way through Bosham and Bosham Quay, touching on the story of King Canute, who had a palace on this harbour. According to legend this is where he stood to command the tides. (Spoiler alert: he couldn't.) Stories of Canute trying to control the water vary – some say it was delusion, his lust for power boundless, while others claim he was showing no leader has absolute power, his lesson Socratic, exemplifying fairness and wisdom.

Canute, or Cnut, reigned early in the second millennium, ruling Denmark, England, Norway and part of Sweden, a Viking empire referred to as Anglo-Scandinavia or the North Sea Empire. Canute, a Dane, is considered by many the most effective king in Anglo-Saxon history, maintaining power by uniting Scandinavians and English by custom, wealth and trade rather than military might alone. Canute's reign further reinforced Danish-British ties established by his father, Sven Forkbeard (whom we know from Reading) and Sven's father, Harald Bluetooth. Yes, the Bluetooth we know from mobile devices, the modern symbol being Norse runes for Harald's initials, the interconnected X-B a translated H-B. Manufacturer Ericsson's choice of name and symbol are a nod to King Harald, Canute's granddad, who managed to initiate communication across formerly unbridgeable geography.

Following the pragmatism of Bluetooth and Forkbeard, Canute continued to expand commerce and immigration, encompassing a growing Norse-Gael population in the British Isles. While focusing on culture and trade, Canute retained a formidable navy in trademark Viking style. His fleet's described in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*: "There were so many kinds of shields, that you could have believed that troops of all nations were present … Gold shone on the prows, silver also flashed on the variously shaped ships … For who could look upon the lions of the foe, terrible with the brightness of gold, who upon the men of metal, menacing with golden face ... who upon the bulls on the ships threatening death, their horns shining with gold, without feeling any fear for the king of such a force? Furthermore, in this great expedition there was present no slave, no man freed from slavery, no low-born man, no man weakened by age; for all were noble, all strong with the might of mature age, all sufficiently fit for any type of fighting, all of such great fleetness, that they scorned the speed of horsemen."

A touch exuberant perhaps, but it leaves one convinced, grandiosity aside, you wouldn't want to mess with King Canute's fleet. Then a mere decade after his passing, Canute's heirs also having died, William of Normandy arrived – descended from another long line of Viking nobles. The Conquest ensued, Anglo-Scandinavia was no more, and a new breed of Northmen ruled England. But Canute's reign marks an integration of Viking culture that remains a UK fixture.

Making our way around Bosham, we view a plundered parish, where pirate raiders stole the church's huge tenor bell. Getting it aboard must've been a feat in itself. But the pirates' ship sank a short distance from shore. Here's where history and myth blur, or juicify if you prefer. Just why the ship went down was never determined. Was it the weight of the bell cracking the hull? Misplaced ballast capsizing the craft? Or was it, as many believe, the bell's last stand, destroying her captors? Witnesses claimed as church bells rang warning on shore the stolen bell onboard called back, a ringing swansong, and with that the ship went down. Long after, when the remaining church bells were rung, people swore they heard the sunken tenor chiming in, ringing from the depths of the bay.

The Bayeux Tapestry refers to where we are, with Bosham as the meeting place of King Harold and Edward prior to the Battle of Hastings, where Harold was killed. And here in Bosham's church, with its missing, haunting bell, a Saxon grave was discovered years later. Historians are convinced it's King Harold's tomb. The church, however, won't permit disturbance to the grave, adding to the layers of mystery that remain.

Mark and Louise pack food and take us for a hike, driving from Chichester to sprawling South Downs National Park – steep chalk hills, thick forest and pastoral grasslands stretching across Sussex. Our trek takes us into the Kingley Vale National Nature Reserve. From a carpark we follow a narrow footpath into a forest of ancient yew – the trees used to make English longbows. When young, yews' outer bark is tough and strong while inner growth's springy and resilient, resulting in wood that can be cut and bent into powerful composite longbows. Shot by a trained archer, longbow arrows can soar hundreds of yards with deadly accuracy. This technology maintained England's military might for three centuries and was paramount in major victories over the French in the Hundred Years' War in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Archery training was mandatory in England. Able-bodied men trained daily, the building of strength and expertise required to draw the bow a lifetime commitment.

Archeologists have found a disproportionate number of Englishmen from this time with abnormally large upper bodies, evidenced by large rib cages and shoulder bones, grown to accommodate overly developed chest and back muscles. Over a few generations of consistent and prolonged use, archers' bodies continued to adapt, supporting exaggerated muscle

mass. This same process of regionalized genetic development is found in Vikings – outsized chests and shoulders from lifetimes of rowing and fighting with heavy weapons.

English yews were harvested for centuries to make longbows. The fact this clump of old growth trees exists is remarkable. The trail we're on vanishes into dark forest, a literal sleepy hollow, like a long forgotten secret. It's strangely quiet. We leave the path and creep our way through. One of the giants is over two thousand years old, making it Britain's oldest living organism (aside from Cliff Richard). It *feels* haunted here and I'm glad it's daytime. When light wanes it's said the yews come to life. I can almost see it – branches stretching, bark fingers gnarled and greedy.

Following a stretch of timelessness we pick up the trail, break from the forest and begin to climb. The path disappears and land opens up. We ascend a wide green swath like a steeply inclined football pitch. Behind us are views of Wessex and The Downs – a rolling patchwork of greens. Beyond is the blue of The Solent and a sliver of the Isle of Wight. We rest with views and picnic – bread, cheese and chutney with packets of crunchy salted things in fun shapes that resemble nothing.

We climb some more. The higher the land, it seems, the deeper the history. At the top of the rise – one of many stretching into the distance, we come to the Devil's Humps. Archeological dating identifies activity here since the Stone Age, two millennia prior to the Romans. The humps are a series of barrows – burial mounds used repeatedly through the ages, including the Viking era. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* specifies this as the place where fighters from Chichester defeated marauding Danes, a resounding English victory. High-ranking Scandinavians were buried here, giving the humps their alternate name – The Kings' Graves. Legend claims it's these Vikings that haunt the yew forest below.

I thought I'd simply come for exercise, lunch and vistas but instead we've unearthed history in tidy snapshots, layered like the land. Completing an oblique loop, we follow a well-worn path through oak, hawthorn and wild orchids in bloom, then drive home to a fridge full of icy one-litre bottles of Estrella lager (bless those Spaniards).

The evening's spent partying with new friends – Mark and Louise's extended family – laughing, cheering, jeering and singing along with televised Eurovision finals. Next day, with residual lager completing its

circuit through my system (curse those Spaniards), we walk a further stretch of Chichester harbour, this time around the sleepy community of Emsworth. It's a day of dull sky and chalky cloud, the same feeling in my head. Along the meandering shore we spot a duck in a clump of reeds on a sludgy feeder creek, imitating baby Moses. Black-headed gulls titter on a brick-paved bankside, swapping dirty jokes no doubt. And aloof white swans take no notice, nesting in an outflow canal, their downy cygnets paddling in little figure eights.

COTSWOLDS

According to a tourist brochure the Cotswolds boast "Stunning landscapes and quaint honey-coloured chocolate box villages." It's our first foray into central England and I'm keen to see this quaintness featured so often in British stories and film.

We leave the train at Cheltenham Spa. Despite fatigue we're energized – the juxtaposed cycle of lassitude and rejuvenation I associate with travelling somewhere new. Shouldering packs we walk toward town centre, ignoring maps and instead using a general sense of direction. We follow a leafy pedestrian footpath, then curving roadway and find our accommodation a short while later, a small hotel with a Tuscan feel in the shade of a dour stone church.

We unpack and organize a bit as we're here for the better part of a week. It's been a month of travel and consistent with *WKRP* lyrics I'm "tired of packin' and unpackin'." We'll be back on the road soon enough, so for now we'll relax.

Setting out on this odyssey felt momentous. It was month end – the last day in our home. I gave the landlord our apartment keys, did a load of laundry in the building basement, confusing the person I visited with when I said I no longer lived there, and left with an armload of clothing, letting the building door lock behind me. I had three keys: one for our vehicle, one to a post office box and one for a padlock to a small storage locker. It was the freest I'd ever felt.

Our flight was a couple of days away so we settled into a Vancouver hotel, making final packing decisions and generally waiting to leave. I hadn't bothered paring things for packing, knowing there was time to

figure it out. I arrived at the hotel hauling an eclectic mountain of gear like some sort of touring circus, or royalty, or a multi-stage rock show – I couldn't even pick the simile, so multitudinous were my choices. But I made one very poor decision. And that was to pack a third of a bottle of red wine – an eight-dollar bottle of wine. Yes, if you care to do the math, just under three dollars of wine. Which I'd packed like an heirloom amongst our possessions. Of course the bottle broke in transit, unbeknownst to me. And naturally, I'd taken care to pack it in the bag with all our travel documents, paper records and cash.

A bellman helped with my bags.

"Ah, sir?" he said.

"Yes?"

"This one's dripping."

"Oh," I said. "Well. Fuck."

And I spent my first few hours of freedom on a hotel bathroom floor with a hair dryer, flapping books, paperwork and money, wringing out clothing and mopping up just under three dollars of red wine, which goes a remarkably long way when not consumed but instead emptied into paper-packed luggage. Now you know why Neil Oliver looks at me the way he does from the back cover of *Vikings*.

So here in Cheltenham I'm having a chuckle sorting my books, all of which are bulging burgundy wedges. Maps, however, which I brought as we'd often be out of Google or cell service range, now resemble old charts, stained and frayed. The only things missing are charred corners, a scowling, wind-blowing cloud and maybe a dragon on one side, where the edge of the Earth drops off.

Feeling the itch of cabin fever, or more accurately hotel-room fever, we hit the streets of Cheltenham, conducive to ambling exploration. From town centre we follow Montpelier Walk amongst Regency buildings, the look of Bath Spa – gothic cathedrals and Edwardian construction – multi-pane glass in small squares above with broad bay windows below.

Cotswold stone sets the architecture apart, golden limestone that radiates warmth, an inviting amber glow. Every stone edifice looks welcoming, softer than the ashy sandstone the Scots shipped everywhere for construction. Even mansions here strike me as homely and quaint. In *The Map That Changed the World*, Simon Winchester writes of Cotswold villages, “A huddle of warm-looking Jurassic stone houses, clustered amicably in some river-carved notch in the meadows can be so lustrously perfect, so quintessentially English, that seeing it brings a catch to the throat.” I do in fact experience a gag-like catch in the throat at his saccharine description, but the fact remains, Cotswold stone is beautiful.

We pass a narrow side-lane at the medieval church of Saint Mary’s. Boys kick a football in the tight laneway, bouncing ricochets against the church wall, the scene striking me as human-sized pinball. And with a feel for the town we stroll back to our lodging, content to be stationary a while.

Our room’s nice but lacks natural light and despite our need to rest, we find ourselves drawn outside, seeking sun. Days are long and we take a late afternoon saunter to Pitville Park, a blend of paths and city streets denoted as the Pitville Walk. The park houses the Pitville Pumps, used to extract spring water that made this town a popular nineteenth-century spa destination.

Virginia Woolf describes this kind of urban stroll, writing, “As we step out of the house on a fine evening between four and six we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one’s room.” Agreeable indeed. And so we join the vast army, “in the communal solitude of urban walkers,” as Rebecca Solnit labels it in *Wanderlust*.

The park’s an inviting green sprawl with serpentine lakes, stone bridges, waterfowl and anglers. Fishermen cast from an embankment next to a “No Fishing” sign. I strike up conversation with two guys who look like the park may be their home, and ask what they’re fishing for. They’re both friendly and in gruff voices rattle off names of fish I’ve never heard of and then they say perch.

“Ah, perch,” I say like an expert.

“Yeah, perch,” they say with smiles and nods.

Rest and relaxation be damned – we're ready to explore. So we catch a bus from Cheltenham to Burton-on-the-Water, touted as the Venice of the Cotswolds – meandering water and picturesque stone bridges. But as we pull into Burton all we see are locust-swarms of tourists. So we remain seated, let the bus empty, and continue on, following wavy highway through endless canola – blankets of buttercup blossoms. Streets are quieter at Stow-on-the-Wold, so we disembark to see the town. The temperature's dropped alarmingly, bright and dry but windy and cold. We bundle up and explore.

Stow dates to 700 BC, a Celtic-Briton market centre, then Roman and eventually Saxon. Like any commercial town it transformed with rulers and residents, goods changing with the land – in this case from flint to iron and then wool. Unlike Chichester's buttercross, Stow's town centre is a triangle, the intersection of three roads unchanged for twenty-seven hundred years. At the crossroads stands a stone obelisk commemorating the Battle of Stow in 1646, the resounding defeat of Royalist forces by Parliamentarians, marking the turning point of the English Civil War.

It's another pleasant morning – sunny, cool and windy – not quite warm enough for shorts, unless you're a German tramper in which case they're essential, along with long dark socks and round spectacles. Today we're hiking. We have a few miles to reach a trailhead in Leckhampton and walk a circuitous route to maximize green space, passing Cheltenham Promenade, High Street and a series of grassy lots, June blossoms vibrant and fragrant. Chill wind gusts in the sunshine. We skirt the River Chelt on London Road, linking up with Old Bath Road – streets and paths unchanged for centuries.

Before long we're in a quiet residential neighbourhood with curving treed streets, all named Terrace or Court. We find a road we're looking for, follow it and promptly get lost as it turns out to be a Court not a Terrace. Having gone far enough to make backtracking undesirable, we strike a balance between giving up and soldiering on and simply start climbing,

trusting a trail will reveal itself. It's a hill after all, and although it's a decent climb, you can only go up or down. Up leads to the summit – our destination – and down goes back to town.

Sure enough, with a bit of bushwhacking we find a dirt trail, worn over tree roots and patches of scree. We've connected with The Cotswold Way, a hundred-mile footpath running diagonally through The Cotswolds AONB – one of Britain's designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Which I find hugely satisfying, to happen upon one of the world's great hiking trails, even for a short distance.

There's been little rainfall and the trail's dry and accommodating, only a few patches of mud in heavy shade. After a brief but strenuous climb we pass a quarry, a rough cliff of honeyed Cheltenham stone like a scabby stone scar. In the sunlight it's oddly striking and I suspect you can't do much wrong with Cotswold limestone – it looks lovely no matter what. We scramble some more up the steep path of chalk and lime, treacherous in spots, around a bump in the high land – the site of an Iron Age fort. We see another hiker or two but the trail feels private. Views open up, revealing what Armitage describes as "Wordsworthian hills, noble peaks and timeless profiles." Another fine vista, another nod to Wordsworth.

A little further on and up we come to our destination, a flat summit with a sprawling panorama of the valley and Devil's Chimney. The Chimney is a slender tower of limestone on the high hill overlooking Leckhampton and Cheltenham. It's one of those geological features you'd expect to see in a Roadrunner cartoon, something Wile E. Coyote would use as a launch pad for rocket-powered roller-skates or a rubber band and anvil.

Remarkably, this tall finger of chalky white rock has survived earthquakes and years of daring climbers. It centres a commanding view of the countryside – lush greens, bright yellow canola and red-roofed barns – and strikes me as a painter's thumb, held up to align the subject before dabbing a palette. There's no explanation of how the rock column was formed, whether it's natural or the result of quarrying efforts long ago. The local story, tongue-in-cheek, is that while city folk reaped the benefits of the quarry, poorly paid miners shaped the stone into a finger, *the* finger, as a grand gesture to their employers far below. As we take in the view, a dog comes by and greets us with a panting smile, followed by an owner.

“We used to climb up there,” he says, indicating the flat top of the stone column. “To the top of The Chimney. We’d set off fireworks on New Year’s Eve.”

My stomach crawls at the thought – loose rock and a precipitous drop. “That must’ve put on quite a show for the folks below,” I say.

He nods. “Kind of dangerous. But worth it.”

GLASGOW

On the train – Cheltenham to Birmingham, outside’s hot sun and icy wind, pleasant and cold as I quietly work on a Birmingham accent, imagining myself a 1920s Peaky Blinder. The train bisects pastures in yellow and green with high trees and low walls, branded cows and painted sheep – inked-up gangbangers munching their turf. On the outskirts of Birmingham the rails parallel narrow canals. Squat barge-boats glide under brick archways, canopies of leaves and blossoms. Freshwater weeds, long and green, wave elegantly, relaxed as the barges and murky water. The city skyline’s proud and sturdy. There’s a colossal brick tower reminiscent of Venice, a sprawling cathedral with mosque-like onion domes, and a bustling central station where trains fan in every direction like points on a compass.

The old lands of Wessex and Mercia are behind us, our train now heading through Northumbria to Glasgow. Voices on the PA have changed. At Wolverhampton it was the elocution of BBC One. A few miles closer to the Scottish border and it’s now the phlegmy brogue of a Mike Myers character. Which reminds me of Scottish comedian Danny Bhoy, differentiating the occasionally confused accents of Scottish and Irish.

“They can be subtle,” he says. “But if you listen very closely you can tell them apart. *This* is Scottish. ‘Och, hul-low, how’rr yoo?’ And *this* is Irish. ‘Teetilly-tee potatoes!’ Do you hear the difference?”

The train banks, giving us a tilting sway. There’s a gentle clatter as cutlery vibrates on plates. Cabin pressure tightens. More greens whiz past, along with brick homes and hedgerows, swathes of canola, round chimneys and tall brick columns. Leafy deciduous bend in a breeze. Another train passes, rocking the carriage. There’s a power plant outside

Crewe – concrete hourglass cooling towers, massive and ominous. Freshly turned fields sit ready for planting. Not far from here James Small designed the Scots Plough in the late eighteenth century, possibly the most significant improvement to farming ever, enabling more soil to be turned, improving nutrient replenishment, irrigation and land productivity. Little has changed in the technology since.

As we move north, yellow-stone brick gets darker, honey shifting from the amber of clover to manuka caramel. A wind farm's doing its thing, giant and languid. Hills grow, bunching like blankets, soft peaks and plateaus. Inside, a cup of sweet tea with shortbread. Outside, tussock and sheep. We pass crumbled stone walls, unchanged, I suspect, since Romans came and went. We pass a roofless building of weathered stone and make a quick stop in Oxenholme – gateway to the Lake District.

"First time on this route?" an attendant asks.

We tell her it is.

"Up ahead, outside Oxenholme, look out this side. The beauty's ..." holding a hand to her chest she takes a deep breath, "Just *ahhh*. So lovely." She smiles. "Don't take any pictures. You'll miss the beauty. Just look."

Which is what we do. And it's as she described, as much in sentiment as words. Hills keep growing, morphing to mountains, and colours bloom – heather and gorse, mauve and gold, purple-chlorophyll trees the colour of claret, sheep in streaky grays and blacks amongst the cream. A field of Holsteins.

"Tickets please."

"Are we in Scotland yet?" I ask.

"Not yet love, about five minutes out of Carlisle," she says, stressing the second syllable. "There's a sign. Tough to read though," she adds with a grin, "At a hundred kilometers an hour."

The train splits Carlisle, a walled city of lustrous red brick. We leave England and have a celebratory drink as we cross the border; for me a Tilting Bitter (brewed for Virgin Trains), and for Deb a traditional Scottish Shiraz. I'm reminded of train trips in grad school, getting more booze than our ticketed allotment, sending our friend Rich to flirt with the gay male

stewards who poured, as he was the good-looking one. We *always* got extra free booze.

Our train glides into the cavernous station at Glasgow. Accents are thicker than ever. Our room is nearly adjacent to the station, the staff friendly and welcoming. We drop bags and dive into the city. “The cleanest and beautifullest, best built city in Britain, London excepted,” according to Daniel Defoe, describing Glasgow when he toured Britain and wrote of his journey early in the eighteenth century. I’m not only eager to see Britain’s silver medal city, but to incorporate beautifullest into my vocabulary.

Heavy imposing buildings of red and gold sandstone line the streets, the weight of Victorian affluence and wealth of bygone days. An industrial, shipbuilding city – toughened streets, buildings and the River Clyde. This is the home of Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Say CRM here and everyone knows what you mean, or who you mean.

We pop into a bookstore and I overhear two women talking about an author.

“He died?”

“Bit on the dead side, yes.”

I thought I was doing well with the accent, managing interactions on the train and at the hotel. Then I try to buy some books. And the clerk says undecipherable words to me. They’re in fact numbers, which are facing me on the cash register, but the sounds coming from this man’s mouth resemble nothing I’ve ever heard. I can imagine the look on my face. Or lack of a look – just blank.

After a comically long pause I say, “Huh?”

To which he replies, “Huh?” Which I *still* don’t understand.

According to Theroux, “No alphabet exists for the Glaswegian accent – phonetic symbols are no good without a glottal stop, a snort, or a wheeze.” Later I visit with a Scottish cabbie with a thick highland brogue. I tell him of my Glaswegian challenges.

“Och, ya kinna’ unnerrstan’ a worrdt they say!”

And I laugh, feeling vindicated.

We visit Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum to study CRM and Viking relics. Dali's *Christ of Saint John of the Cross* is here, so breathtaking you forgive the maniac's behaviour. The building itself is an exhibit – Spanish Baroque with a pipe-organ centring a high-ceilinged foyer. In the Viking room I absorb exhibits – a longsword from 950, engraved with the blacksmith's brand, *Ingelrii*. There's a penannular brooch from Dublin and a hogback gravestone, the size and look of a crocodile. A manuscript lies open, written in Gaelic and Latin, documenting the sacking of Iona – St Columba's abbey – in 802. And a map of the time is displayed, in better condition than my wine-soaked AA British road atlas. The centre of the map is western Norway, with north Scotland, Orkney, Shetland, Iceland and Faroe spread out left to right – the Norse frontier. Faro means island of travellers, the archipelago serving as stepping stones for voyaging Norse, although Vikings weren't mapmakers. Direction and distance came from oral legend, sun and stars, and the math of speed and time.

Outside the museum we stroll through the surrounding park and cross the River Kelvin. Beyond is the University of Glasgow, venerable and inspiring. Saint Columba Church of Scotland – a beast in red sandstone, fronts a busy street, displaced so far from Iona. A directional sign points around the city – Kelvinbridge Station, Botanic Gardens, University of Glasgow and the College of Piping. Lunch is a stop at the CRM-designed Willow Tea Rooms on Sauchiehall Street – mince, taters, neeps and Scottish breakfast tea. After which we carry on to The Lighthouse, Scotland's national centre for design and architecture – elegant, progressive construction and another instalment to an unintended lighthouse trend emerging on our journey.

The city exudes pride, time plotted in its architecture. It feels like Dunedin, the antipodean Scottish town, staggeringly affluent for a brief period – imposing architecture of brick and stone, somehow prosaic and prepossessing at once. Dichotomies akin to the places – cold climate, warm people. No wonder Edinburgh needs to be the city of culture. Glaswegians laugh, knowing they live in the better city. It's Melbourne and Sydney, without skin cancer or sharks.

North Sea

In Scotland's story I read that they came the Gael and the Pict,
the Angle and Dane.

—The Proclaimers, *Scotland's Story*

ORKNEYS

I want to explore Viking islands, reminiscent of the map at the Kelvingrove – the Norwegian frontier. I spin the north end of a globe: Iceland, Faroes, Shetland and Orkney, the latter two uniquely Norse Scottish – outposts of Dark Age clans, Earls and Jarls. And my finger strikes home on the Orkneys, a UNESCO World Heritage Site layered in Stone Age and Viking history. And simple as that, we have the next stop on our viking itinerary.

We're at Glasgow Airport in a compact regional gate with a handful of travellers – underdressed tourists with heavy bags and heavily-clothed locals carrying nothing at all. We cross the tarmac and duck into a Saab prop-plane where a flight attendant rearranges us to balance weight. My seat has no window. I'll have to crane for a view. Either that or keep a mental image of the airline's promo poster from the terminal – a frightening picture of a plane buzzing a tower, seemingly about to plow into a sand dune.

Our Saab comes to life and roars down the runway, fishtailing in the way only small planes in strong wind can. We climb aggressively into bands of fluffy white then level out, the drone of props deafening. Coffee's served tepid, we're told, as a safety precaution on the notoriously bumpy flight. And I'm given a chewy candy bar best-before last month. The candy's new to me so I don't know if it's equally chewy when fresh – don't know, don't care. Jaw exercise feels good in my ears, the confection an agreeable accompaniment to cold coffee. The plane banks and I stretch across the aisle to peer out a window. Through pillows of low cloud I spy strips of

green and honey-brown in glens and rugged bens – Scottish highlands below with scattered islands beyond.

Adrift in the stormy North Sea, the Orkneys boast eighty-five hundred years of human history – Mesolithic tribes to defiant Picts the Romans couldn't conquer. Virtually nothing remains of the Picts, just a few character scribbles on stone like elaborate hieroglyphs on the Orcadian island of Mainland. It's believed eeny-meeny-miney-moe were in fact one-two-three-four in Pictish, discovered as shepherds muttered this while counting sheep. The few known words, written in Pictish, are lavish in style, shape and design, the derivation of the word picture.

The Faroe, Shetland and Orkney island chains were frequent destinations for Norwegian Vikings – from raiding to trading and ultimately annexed by Norway. The scraping of soil on these stormy islands remains remarkably fertile, hardy land scattered like seed from Scotland's extreme north. It's said if you scratch the Orkneys, they bleed history. Severe weather continues to unearth archeological finds – wind and sea peel ground cover away, eroding coastal sod and sand to expose artifacts and Neolithic building sites like earthy giftwrap torn from buried presents. Orcadian poet George Mackay Brown describes these islands, "like sleeping whales … beside an ocean of time … layers of cultures and races are inescapable and unavoidable wherever you go. There are stories in the air here. If I lived to be 500, there would still be more to write."

Our noisy little plane bounces onto windswept tarmac and we're driven to Kirkwall to get our rental car. Orcadian flags, almost Norwegian, fly from buildings. A snaking coast abuts rolling, rocky fields and stunted trees. I think of a Montague James line from *A Warning to the Curious*: "A belt of old firs, windbeaten, thick at the top, with the slope that old seaside trees have; seen on the skyline from a train would tell you in an instant, if you did not know it, that you were approaching a windy coast."

We start with a walk around Kirkwall's town centre. A traffic sign reads, "Otters Crossing." Another warns, "Elderly Crossing." There's a ruckus – the sound of a mob approaching. And an open box pickup overflowing with young guys trundles toward us. I wonder if we need to make a run for it but realize the clamor's just boisterous. A dozen hollering, chanting men are stuffed in the back of the ute, banging plastic tubes on the vehicle. Locals shout and wave as they pass. It's a stag party, and it's late-morning.

How long it’s been going isn’t clear but given the state of the groom, probably since yesterday, at least. The man of the hour’s in rough shape, reeling, roughly held up by his mates, stripped and dripping in treacle. It’s ritual, we learn, and they’re on their way to the harbour where they’ll throw him in the North Sea, as you do. Lynch mobs, I suspect, show more compassion.

A farmers’ market is underway and we buy meat, cheese and baked goods to stock our rental apartment, but before finding our accommodation I need to visit the cathedral, looming like a monitor watching us sinners at play. This is St Magnus Cathedral, constructed of brick in local red sandstone – regal and bloodlike, mottled with time and salt wind. Architecture’s Norman with a Romanesque flair, yellow sandstone interspersed with the red, adding a soft checkering. It was built in the twelfth century – a pivotal Viking period, Christianity having trumped paganism a century earlier – politics and economics of the new faith surpassing tradition.

The space feels holy, old and weighty, interior arches resembling a square Coliseum. The mass of the building squeezes the nave but gothic height precludes closeness. Daylight leaks through slender panes of stained glass, seemingly absorbed by the stone. It smells cold. There’s an overwhelming hush – the soul-sucking silence of old churches. Reverie? Spirits? Maybe centuries of echoed prayer. A hundred years ago – eight hundred years after construction – a hidden compartment was found in one of the round brick columns. Inside was a box of human bones, the skull hewn by an axe – secrets sealed in mortar and time.

Our initial exploration takes us on a long drive south over island-linking causeways around Scapa Flow, a swath of ocean surrounded by islets like a broad tidal lake. This place has always been nautically significant – a Second World War defence with the Churchill Barriers as well as a transport and trade hub since the time of habitation. Snaking road offers undulating views and I do my best to avoid otters and the elderly. We pass the remains of a recent shipwreck, rusting like a whale carcass in the

shallows, and visit the tiny ornate chapel on Lamb Holm built by Italian POWs during the Second World War.

On a series of bridges we island-hop across Burray and South Ronaldsay, driving through the hamlet of St Margaret's Hope. Norway's King Haakon IV wintered his ships here in 1263, arriving during a solar eclipse. He stayed at the Bishop's Palace by the cathedral we've just left. This from the *Orkneyinga Sagas (The History of the Earls of Orkney)*, written by Icelanders in the thirteenth century. I was only able to find the Saga in e-book format, but reading it on a tablet felt wrong. Being here feels proper – tangible. As though I've been thumbing a ride on the roadside and have finally been picked up, hitching a lift on history's coattail.

From St Margaret's Hope we drive to Hoxa and hike the headland, one of Orkney's heritage walks. The trail – dirt, mud and long wet grass – follows the peninsula, a steep jut of land with more views of Scapa Flow and its jagged ring of islands. We scramble around crumbling concrete pillboxes – Second World War guns of the Balfour Coast Battery. Across the water on the island of Flotta is the Buchanan Battery, the other claw of this military pincer. Sun bedazzles the water in silvery gold. From the path we cut across a farm to a tearoom, a nondescript plank building at the end of a potholed dirt road, happy to be out of the wind.

Back in the car for an evening explore we follow the road to Twatt. Yes. Twatt. Laughing, we rattle off lewd one-liners until we're bored. Not that we run out of material, we just get bored. Following a narrow dirt lane we park and walk to Birsay Head, another high headland with gusty views of North Atlantic. To the south, setting sun illuminates russet creases on a steep blister of land known as a pap. Seabirds hang on updrafts: gulls and guillemots, shags and fulmars. Towering surge breaks on basalt cliffs and angry froth washes over dark plates of stone at the tideline. Offshore a gleaming green pocket of riptide bulges like meniscus, oddly calm in the midst of heaving breakers, a Scylla to our Charybdis. Light slowly fades on the drive home to Dounby with BBC Scotland on the radio – accordion and fiddle, a little cèilidh in our car.

This far north, days are long. Sun peaks through curtains at three AM and birdsong's constant. A clothes-drying rack sits outside our little rental

like a skeletal patio umbrella. Clothes-pegs are extra-large, marked “Hurricane Force,” and I wonder what the elements have in store.

I find a hamper of goodies delivered – biscuits, savories and eggs fresh from Twatt (another round of one-liners). I take a photo of the carton (“eggs fresh from Twatt”) to share with my immature friends, that’s to say, all of them. The picture’s blurry from my giggling but sufficient to verify my story. (Later, at a farmers’ market, I see a produce table staffed by two middle-aged women, their hand-written sign reading, “Yes, we still have eggs.”)

Heading out in the car we drive west and south to Stromness, a functional town with ferry ports in a sheltered crook of a bay. This is the home of the Hudson’s Bay Company, and I think of Canadian and world history – the fur trade, search for a Northwest Passage and colonization, emanating from this unassuming port. Whaling fleets came and went and Cook’s ships *HMS Discovery* and *Resolution* returned here in 1780 from Kealakekua to report the Captain’s death.

I imagine Wayne and Garth making wiggly fingers to the sound of flashbacks and time-travel as we drive through the Ages – Iron to Bronze to Stone – for looming in the distance are the Standing Stones of Stenness. Imagine Stonehenge without crosspieces. Massive stones, smooth as unyielding slabs of lumber, planted upright. We park, negotiate fencing and sheep, and stand amidst them.

Silence.

There’s a juxtaposition of complete grounding and ethereal ambiguity – simultaneously ancient and timeless. Standing here it’s impossible *not* being pagan. But reverie breaks with the throaty sound of a tour coach rumbling our way and we flee, running from the stones to the present like Diana Gabaldon characters.

Further up the road is the Ring of Brodgar, another stone circle – smaller stones but greater in number, still awe-inspiring – a toothy stone ring crowning the land. We slow the car to gawk. The ring’s well off the road, requiring a hike to access. Then we hear the belching bus approach from the last cluster of stones. So I take another blurred photo, hit the gas, and we enjoy a shrinking but peaceful view through the rear window.

Our time travel continues into the Neolithic as we return to the island's west edge to experience the Stone Age village of Skara Brae, where we meet an actual Johnnie Walker. It's still early, a couple of cars in the carpark. Skaill House mansion stands behind us on a rise in the grassy landscape. The house is now a museum, featuring a display of cutlery used by Captain Cook for a pre-voyage meal. I wonder if it's from the Mexican joint in Plymouth.

Sheep graze beside the carpark and lambs play nearby in literal leaps and bounds. The entry to Skara Brae's not yet open and a stiff breeze blows in from the Bay of Skaill, everything monotone gray. Brown wrote, "On the far curving shore of the bay lies Skara Brae, hazy through the sea-haar." Once I learn haar is cold sea fog, I feel he could be describing this very day.

A man approaches, bundled up and smiling in a weather-beaten Aussie bush hat. He sips tea from a ceramic cup and introduces himself as Johnnie. I don't know if he spells his name like the whisky but here beyond the Highlands I like to think so. And he's definitely a walker, exploring the area on foot with backpack and tent.

"Och, ye dinna' need ta pay to see i'. Iss jus' o'er the paddock therr'. Ye kin see i' jus' fine, aye, and save yur'self a few bob," he says.

Johnnie, it turns out, is a comedian and public speaker. He lives in Caithness and has ferried to the Orkneys for a gig. In the Viking Age this was all one Earldom – Orkney and Caithness. Johnnie could've been a bard in the day, travelling the domain. I imagine him on stage, then and now, a story-teller with an engaging presence – utterly Scottish. I'm forced to listen closely to decipher some jargon. He's added a couple of days to his current stay to hike and tent and sightsee.

"Bloody coldt las' ni'," he says, shaking his head, then his fist. "Och, bloody coldt!"

After a moment he continues. "I wuz 'ere jus' afore closin' yais'turr'day. An' the wee lass wouldna' le' me in. Och!" He shakes his fist again. "I say'd, 'Och, iss jus' tain munnuts,' bu' she wouldna' budge." More fist shaking. "An' she were fat too!" At this I thought Johnnie's forearm might dislodge at the elbow, the fist shaking now a physical stammer. "An' I thught, 'Weel then, go on 'ome an' eat yer tins o'

buscuits.’ Och, i’ was jus’ tain munnuts!” The fist shaking continues for a while, then he dumps the last of his tea in disgust.

“Well, thanks Johnnie,” I say, which he believes is for advice on avoiding fees but is actually for providing journal fodder. We smile some more, shaking hands (not fists), and Johnnie turns and disappears into the grassy pasture.

In a few minutes the interpretative centre opens. We pay, leave the interpretative bits for later, and head through the building to the blustery shoreline. This area was buried over time, then partially exposed by storms in the mid-1800s. In the early 1900s another tempest revealed more.

The site contains eight stone dwellings, all linked by covered pathways – a five-thousand-year-old village of furnished homes for several dozen people. Earth and seaside sand preserved the site for five millennia. Construction is unmortared stone walls of neatly stacked flat rocks, staggered like bricks, each dwelling equipped with a fire hearth, a pit for cooking, rock slabs for sleeping and shelves – a *real* Bedrock City. I can imagine a Neolithic man starting his day catching a buzzing bee in a clamshell and using it to shave – a Fred Flintstone Philishave. The other thing that comes to mind is the furnishings – chunky stone slabs layered into shelves, with equally thick cross-pieces dividing the compartments – tonnes of stone, and I imagine a Neolithic spouse standing back, surveying their new home, “It’s nice, but let’s try that shelf over *there*.”

We follow a path circumambulating the village, providing angled views from above. A guard stands discreetly at a distance, sheltered in a hut like a palace guard, and offers a friendly wave. Gazing down I shift focus from the rock structures into the living spaces. With little imagination I’m there, moving through rooms, the walls smoky stone – stacked shellfish, the smell of peat, meat and hairy people. Hard, simple life. No different than our Dounby apartment, only closer to the elements, as modern then as ours now. Another time capsule, but unlike the standing stones, human. More than dwellings, these were homes.

The next few days are an enjoyable blur of exploratory drives, hikes and watery views. Long days get us up and out early, home late. As roads become familiar I notice more. Standing stones are everywhere: a few low, broken ones here, a solitary monster there, some the size of a gnome,

others like phone poles – a stony island pincushion. We drive to crumbling cemeteries and steep volcanic cones, striae of earth and rock and windswept grass, around inlets and lakes, fresh water and salt in grays and browns, blue-greens and inky purple hues. A slate-coloured loch is peaked in whitecaps. A tractor turns a field. Wind turbines crest hills. Author Tom Fort describes a similar view, “wind turbines rotating their pale limbs in a slow, monotonous ballet.”

I check the weather forecast. “Very disturbed with occasional gales.” And I think of the Hurricane Force clothes-pegs. On the southwest coast, near Stromness, a trail hugs rocky shore, a lighthouse across the bay. It’s cold and blustery but rain turns to sun, spearing through slate nimbus. Distant mountains change colour with shifting cloud – green, russet, blue. Waterfowl are bobbing on waves. Black-backed gulls hang in offshore wind, low to the ground, seemingly within arm’s reach. We keep an eye out for puffins – known to pass through – but see none.

On the island’s southeast corner we hike Mull Head – a demanding trail of slick wet grass, bog, tussock and heath, sloping to precipitous cliffs. It’s windy and sunny, warm and cold. We hike around the Brough of Deerness – home to Viking settlement ruins. The rocky brough sits like a massive stone tooth wiggling free from the island. Thirty building foundations remain from the tenth century, the village thought to be a chieftain’s citadel with private chapel. Signage explains, “The artefacts and architecture found indicate long-range connections with Scandinavia, Scotland, the Irish Sea region and Anglo-Saxon England.” Excavation unearthed an Anglo-Saxon coin from around 960 AD, which according to the info plaque places this ruin “among the earliest evidence for Viking Age Christianity in the Scandinavian north.”

We follow the slippery path, skirting the edge of the island. From the trail, sheer cliffs drop immediately to the surf, creating a sense of floating high over the sea, the water seemingly underfoot, albeit two hundred feet down. I feel connected, exposed and vulnerable all at once. Embankments are thick with nesting birds, known as “seabird cities.” Despite the pun, there’s a pecking order to the birds’ nesting, stacked into distinct communities: fulmars at clifftops, kittiwakes, guillemots and razorbills on midrange perches, and shags far below at the shoreline, where water today’s a South Seas shade of teal.

On the footpath, delicate wildflowers bend in the wind – purple bell heather and yellow tormentil. Grass ripples like deep carpet, mimicking waves. There's a speckled eggshell, almost intact, amidst tiny sheaf-like clumps of wheat-brown tussock near the edge. The trail gradually digresses to running water, a boggy creek seeping over the precipice. Ground sucks at my boots and I understand the expression being stogged, a West Country term meaning stuck in a bog. We continue over wet moorland, each step feeling more treacherous atop the cliffs, and slip frequently. I go down once, hard, soaking myself in watery mud.

At a more tentative pace, we traipse back from Mull Head on metalled road bordering private land, reaching an interpretive centre like a small alpine chalet. A few sightseers mill about and the activity feels like a crush compared to our isolation on the trail. My filthy clothes dry quickly in the wind but water's saturated my trail shoes, which will remain soaked for our stay. Pulling them back on feels like sliding my feet into cold and slobbery mouths.

"Fierce weather," I write in my journal as the disturbance hits – driving wind and slanting rain, a day for fires and hot chocolate. But instead we layer up, cinching raingear, and make our way to the Brough of Birsay on the northern stretch of west Mainland.

We park the car and exit, bending into wind, drenched immediately. Hands redden. Fingers stiffen. Noses run. But it's a tidal crossing and to see the other side we need to go now – waiting for fair weather's not an option. So we head onto a rough, curving causeway, a natural path of slick boulders and sea-worn rock. Huge whelks and snails add colour, shape and life to the stone. Across the way is the Brough, symmetrical as a hog-back headstone.

An island fortification, the Brough of Birsay was an early Christian retreat, then Pictish, and eventually a Norse settlement. It's referenced in the *Orkneyinga Sagas* and part of Viking legend. Saint Magnus was buried here before being moved to Kirkwall, but it remained a place of pilgrimage. Thousand-year-old building walls stand low and crumbling around a large foundation, home and outbuilding, fortification, storage and barn. It's desolate, mossy stone that's been mercilessly beaten down by the elements. We're treated much the same, but it's the most exhilarated I've felt in a long time. Bracing and invigorating – cliché and accurate.

We hike through the Norse ruins and a tiny Pictish cave known as a fogou, then climb to the top of the island-hill to face the open sea in pummeling wind and sleety, hypothermic rain. I strike a Kate Winslet pose on the headland and laugh, amazed at how intoxicating this is – miserable and beautiful. In Bernard Cornwell's *Warriors of the Storm,* he describes a Norseman called the Sea King whose "land was scattered wherever the wild waves beat on rock or sand. He ruled where the seals swam and the puffins flew, where the winds howled and where ships were wrecked, where the cold bit like a knife and the souls of drowned men moaned in the darkness." That Viking could lay claim to this space. In a documentary version of Oliver's *Vikings* there's a scene at Jarlshof, a settlement on Shetland identical to here – brough foundations, rock, land – the same as where we are. And I wonder how many places exist, exactly like this.

Late in the day we return to the northwest tip of the island, to Marwick Head, towering waves some of the biggest I've seen – something from a disaster movie. Water builds in skyscraper walls, strafing froth across the choin – the enclosed rocky bay. Shore's made up of bedrock slabs leaning into the rumbling breakers like a spear-laden shield wall – their union a roar.

"If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water," writes anthropologist Loren Eiseley. It's here – a sense of Earth's start, or end. Sun eases to the horizon, a soft glow on the violent beach, and I feel utterly present and laughably small – significantly insignificant. It's oddly empowering.

ORKNEY TO ISLE OF ARRAN

A drizzly Tuesday. The airport gate's nicer than what we came from in Glasgow, appointed with photos and paintings by Orcadian artists, the feel of a collage. A huge map-like poster of islander lineage a thousand years back to Jarls and Viking settlers hangs on a wall – a fifty-generation family tree. A conflicted hum of music emanates from different sources, a confusing blend of genres. There's a mini museum on the history of airmail, an island lifeline. A Rotary collection box sits like a squat panhandler, begging for travellers' currency – the Plexiglas window a rainbow of notes and clumps of coins. People wait. A black-and-white World War II movie plays on a small TV on a rolling stand, rendering

every passenger mute, which I presume is the desired effect. The waiting area's now full of suits – businessmen and one woman – returning to Glasgow.

On the drive here I visited with Allison, an island native. As well as running the car rental agency with her brother, she drives the minibus that takes special needs kids to and from school. She's now driving a second generation of schoolchildren. The relationships, needless to say, are remarkable, familial ties few workers experience. Now Allison's mother, who's seventy-six, drives the minibus a couple of times each week, adding another generation to the service.

"That's wonderful," I said.

"Oh, the kids love her," she said of her mom. Getting to know Allison I'm not surprised.

I glance at my watch. We have no idea how or if we'll travel today. Our plan is to fly to Glasgow, where we'll catch a bus then a train and a ferry to Arran. Rotating strikes are shutting things down with minimal notice, forcing us to improvise as we go. Now weather's taken a starring role – a vengeful antagonist forcing cancellations of the Arran ferry – the Firth of Clyde too stormy to cross. But first we need to fly from Orkney. And we wait. The sky's still heavy, threatening overcast. Meanwhile, machine-guns blare from the TV. Nazis scream and die. Everyone watching smiles.

The PA crackles on: "Folks, due to weather we need to lighten up by eighty kilos. That's one man or one lady plus luggage. Any volunteers, we can get you down to Edinburgh and taxi you over to Glasgow." One of the suits volunteers – a good-sized man. The rest of us applaud. Weather remains bleak and I suspect he'll be the lone survivor.

Eventually weather breaks – a shredding of cloud – and our flight makes it safely from the island of Mainland to *actual* mainland, back to Glasgow. This assumes you consider Great Britain mainland. Things go smoothly for a time – flight, bus, train, ferry. And then they don't. Not quite.

On the bus from Glasgow airport to Paisley Station three people offer different directions to the same place. They're all correct, just different options. Everyone's friendly, helpful. The bus takes a labyrinthine route from airport to train station, tripling time and distance, but having a seat for a while feels good. From the bus stop we cut through a mall by the

train station. Barry White croons from a sound system. Apparently he can't get enough of my love.

An old guy comments on my big backpack. "Tha's a fine wae to carry yer' mooney aroun'. No wee wallet!" And with a chuckle and nod I decide I quite like the idea of simply carrying around a bag of money, nothing else – a Scrooge McDuck sack with a dollar-sign, maybe on a stick – a financially flush hobo.

The train leaves Paisley heading west for Ardrossan harbour and we're quickly into countryside, passing frothy lochs under striped blue-gray sky. An angler trolls from a row boat. Wind turbines dance their ballet on a hill. Stone homes sit in leafy pockets of deciduous. There's a creek and a church spire, fields with horses in blankets and hoods, and a low wall in pretty stone topped with razor-wire, like a model in a vicious hat.

We pass the tidy town of Dalry – organized homes of white with peaked ochre roofs. A dale's filled with sheep, cows and a big red barn. Town names appear in English and Gaelic, Glasgow now feeling a million miles away. We cross the dark creek we've been following and another train passes, giving us, and them I presume, a shake. At Kilwinning a scrawny young man with a slim bouquet of heart-coloured roses disembarks. Deb and I exchange a smile.

There's a trailer park, mobile homes raised on cinderblocks, and I remember songwriter Bill Henderson sharing a story with me about when he lived in a tent with his wife and two kids.

What was that about? I asked. "Building? Travelling? No money?"

"No," he said. "We wanted to get back to the land. Lived there for two years. It was wonderful. I still remember a blackberry pie my wife baked in an oven we made of earth. It was one of the best things ever." The smile on his face conveyed everything. I could smell and taste a pie I'd never seen.

"The strangest thing," he carried on, "was after we gave up the tent and moved into a house. Walking on the floor felt weird. Too high off the ground. Like we weren't connected with the land anymore." And I wonder if trailers on blocks have the same effect.

Suddenly our train's beside the sea, now metallic, sun glimmering on distant waves. Marram-clad dunes front a thrashing ocean while the

distance promises fair weather in twinkling pockets of watery gold. The sea cooperates and the ferry from Ardrossan's running, for now. It's a stout vessel in the proud tradition of Glaswegian shipbuilding. The bow's yawned open, prow pointing to unsettled sky as the ship swallows cars like a whale gulping krill. The passenger lounge fills, youngsters eating chips and grownups drinking tea. Conversation ensues – chatty, familiar. A lovely absence of earbuds.

We pass the breakwater and trundle into the Firth of Clyde, a lumpy sea chopped with whitecaps – proper maritime conditions. Maybe I brought this on, ordering an "Adventurous Ancient Mariner" at the gin lounge in Glasgow. I haul myself outside, buffeted in high wind, and creep to the foredeck, wind pressing me flat against the painted steel. The Scottish flag flies, snapping in headwind. I turn my head and wind whips my hood, giving my face a brutal slap. Sea sparkles under cast-iron clouds, a stunning sunset vista. Fanning sundogs burst through leaden sky, our path toward the light decidedly spiritual. In a short while the Isle of Arran looms, cast in streaky sun. Just how Vikings arrived. Different boats, but a view unchanged.

As our ferry approaches Brodick dock, we watch the solitary bus pull away. I ask a ticket agent, "They're supposed to meet the ferry, aren't they?"

"Oh, more or less. They usually don't."

The next one's in an hour. We check the map. Three miles or so to our lodging, over a prominent hill – also about an hour we figure, and decide to walk. It becomes a highlight of the trip. We're on the east side of Arran, making our way south to Lamlash. There's an occasional backdraft of cars on narrow road but nothing too dangerous. Dense evergreens surround us as we climb. One monstrous tree sprouts fungus in steps like a Swiss Family Robinson stairwell. An unseen woodpecker beats out a rhythm. Wildflowers, heather and gorse sprout yellow, purple and fragrant pink and white blooms. Bright sun splits brooding cloud and a light squall sweeps through. We crest the long hill and beyond lies a steady decline, a quiet golf course, and Holy Isle sitting off Arran's east coast. The Isle's aglow. Actually glowing. And a rainbow, vivid and vibrant, frames the scene, arcing over the island. Once more there's a feeling of brightened colours, abundantly purple: clothing more brilliant than I remember,

wildflowers on the links, and a second rainbow joins the party, intense low bands of indigo-violet.

A welcoming village sits at the base of the hill – grass and pebble seashore, a squat church and a pub. Our accommodation's reminiscent of *Fawlty Towers*, the way you *want* it to be: tilting stairs in little flights of ups and downs – years of additions and renovations, bulging carpet, leaning walls, stiff doors that jam, with a lounge and tiny bar next to separated, cozy dining rooms. The biggest difference, however, is a warm and efficient manager, most *un*-Fawltyesque.

We order fish pie and I stand at the bar awaiting an ale while a friendly, young, inept server works on his Boston accent with me for his acting class. It's clear he's doing an accent, just not clear *what* accent, until he tells me it's Bostonian.

"Hm," I say, searching for something positive. "Watch *Good Will Hunting*. Listen to Matt Damon."

He thinks about it, then tries something else in his "Boston" accent, something growly and mafia-like I don't understand. Maybe an impersonation of De Niro – a De Niro incapable of a Boston accent.

"Hey, that's great. Watch *Good Will Hunting*," I say again, firmly.

Every facet of our short stay's enjoyable. Our cozy room has views of the bay and Holy Isle. The bed swaddles us in comforting hugs. I only crack my head on the sloped ceiling a couple of times, which for me is quite good. The lounge plays wonderful, scratchy, Depression Era music – tunes to accompany Charlie Chaplin. It's the kind of place I envision Agatha Christie settling in to write.

We stroll around Lamlash, sample baked goods and snoop through retail shops. We pass a home mid-renovation with a concrete Norman bust, destined, I presume, for the garden. Weather brightens and warms. Seals, ducks and swans swim along the shoreline. I read the following by Fort: "It is a curious word, promenade, meaning both the activity and where it takes place. The pleasure of it is at the heart of the pleasure of the seaside town: the stroll from nowhere in particular to nowhere in particular and back again, in no kind of hurry, with no particular purpose in mind except to pull the sea air deep into the lungs, feel the rhythm of the sea and match

it to the rhythm of your heartbeat and the tread of your feet and to notice and delight in the incidentals." And that's precisely what we're doing.

For supper we choose "A Taste of Arran," a share-platter of island offerings: fish and game, fruit, cheese and nuts served with local whisky. Next morning I order the "House Special Oatmeal" – served with cream and more whisky, and I think of Norm Macdonald when he said, "That day I drank a lot of whisky. But next day I sobered up. And then I remembered I still had more whisky."

And I find a medieval Irish poem, *Agalllamh na Senorach*, describing where we are:

Arran of the many stags,

The sea strikes against her shoulders,

Companies of men can feed there,

Blue spears are reddened among her boulders.

Merry hinds are on her hills,

Juicy berries are there for food,

Refreshing water in her streams,

Nuts in plenty in the wood.

A little clunky through translation but I like it, praising this island's enduring abundance. A hind is a deer, by the way, like Drake's ship, the *Golden Hind*. In case you thought he named his ship after a gilded backside. He didn't. Funnily enough the stern did have a lot of glitz – gold leaf and such – so Drake wasn't opposed to ride-pimping. But no, it refers to a deer. Matters of the hart, you could say. I also enjoy the fact this poem could be describing our "Taste of Arran" share-platter, without the whisky.

When I think of the rest of the country lying ahead – where we'll explore over the next few weeks – Arran's been as suitable a kickoff as our sampler platter. Geologically, this island's considered Scotland in miniature, making it a kind of movie trailer to our film-like experience. The bedrock of basalt is some of Earth's oldest stone, as entrenched as Norse history. It's as though we're aboard Mister Peabody's Wayback Machine – the Norman bust a nod to a Viking past, while south of us at a place called King's Cross, a Norse grave yielded iron nails, rivets and a ninth-century bronze coin. Another grave nearby contained a warrior's

sword and shield. And across the island sits mythic King's Cave where Robert the Bruce sheltered in the early 1300s, more needlework on our growing tapestry.

ARRAN TO ICELAND

We leave the island in intermittent showers, barely enough to warrant my billowing pack cover. This time the bus connects and we shuffle onto the ferry at Brodick, bound for Ardrossan. At the concession a small sign advertises the Malt of the Month, "Jura 10-year-old, double measure, Only £4.95," the capital O assuring good value.

Arran fades away through smudged windows. Were it not for shrinking land and a slight tilt to port I wouldn't know we were moving. Previous days' wind and swell were too much for the ferry. Now the crossing's calm, leaving us feeling fortunate to have gotten to and from the island as planned. It's pleasant and quiet in the passenger lounge, people drinking tea and coffee. (No one taking advantage of the Malt of the Month special.) Faded photos decorate the walls: Caledonian MacBrayne ferries and Brodick Castle, the image on the £20 Scottish note.

Mid-morning sea remains friendly, rippling gray chop with light wind. Island lumps peer through mist with no horizon, just cloud bleeding into water. We pass our sister ship, another Cal-Mac, larger, black and white and red, heading southwest to the Kintyre Peninsula. A blue and white bulk freighter rumbles by. Inside the cabin of our ferry a redheaded woman naps upright, her head lolling on a windowsill. Her partner taps an iPad, fingering a deck of smokes. Both have big cameras and I recognize them from Lamlash, prime real-estate for birding and photography, scenery that transforms with shifting light like costume changes at a Cher concert.

Today our connections are tight. With train strike uncertainty I've hired a cab to get us from Ardrossan ferry to Glasgow Airport in Paisley. I sit up front and spend the long ride visiting with our driver, who speaks fondly of Arran.

"Me wife's from Arran," he says, with a few extra Rs in Arran. "Been going there fifty years. Just went. For sex nights." (After a startled beat I realize that's the sound of "six" in Scots-English.) "Went sex times a year

too. Back when I had me a real job," he smiles. "Get me pension now. Had me birthday two weeks agoo." He explains he's still keen to work, but less. "Maybe work at Brodick Castle, for me brother-in-law. Gotta decide for pay or volunteeerr. Probubly volunteeerr."

Gradually we wind into Glasgow, a sense of progress with city traffic. Weather permitting, we're heading as far north as this journey will take us, to volcanoes, geysers and the birthplace of Viking Sagas. For the longest time it was simply terra incognita, a fabled chunk of frozen earth beyond humankind. Now it's our destination.

Icelandic Sagas

The bustle of preparation – the act of departing, the prospect of change, and subsequent stretching out of the imagination – have at all times the effect of stirring the blood, and giving a quicker motion to the spirits.

—Captain George Back, in search of lost Arctic explorer John Ross

ICELAND

Our flight leaves Glasgow in boggy nimbus. Efficient, emotionless seat-belt and safety reminders follow in Icelandic, then English. I peruse the drinks menu. Two beers. Not a choice of two. A serving of two. If you only want one I presume you find another lone drinker and share. There's also wine and a spirit distilled from birch.

Following a fugue-like flight we begin our descent, sky now intensely bright. Sun shines on rigid sheets of blue-white cloud like starched glacier. Below, gleaming Arctic water stretches forever, beckoning possibility. My water bottle collapses, vacuuming into a knot with a *scrunch* – the noise somehow cautionary.

Irish monks, it's believed, came here first – Saint Brendan in his frozen leather boat. A party of Norse came later, for a time. Then a few Swedes, also for little more than a brief landing. But eventually Floki Vilgerdarson arrived – Raven-Floki. He came from Norway, determined to see what this remote Arctic place had to offer, if anything, and what it was that sent earlier would-be settlers scurrying home. By definition, Raven-Floki founded Iceland. Heaving through fog and ice on the North Sea and Atlantic, he released three reconnaissance ravens – the explorer's explorers, which repeatedly returned to the ship. Until one did not – the bird that Floki followed, the raven leading him here.

Land pops into focus through windows. Tawny ground rises into striated bands of blue, capped in snow and ice surrounded by meandering fjords. Patches of scrubby green dot volcanic brown scree. There's a scatter of

white dwellings plunked onto jagged shores, gnarly juts of land and wide flat tundra. I feel far from home.

A customs officer waves us through but we stop and ask to have passports stamped. She digs around for an official stamp, *ker-chunks* our paperwork and welcomes us with a smile. I suspect our excitement shows. An idling bus will take us from Keflavik to Reykjavik. Everyone's bundled up, rucksacks and hair in great quantities – dreadlocks and beards, hostel-bound travellers. Bulky clothing and packs shrink the interior of the bus. Some idiot's wearing cargo shorts in the frigid cold. There's always one. And I recognize a man from the flight, Crazy Old Hippy I've dubbed him. Not good crazy, *bad* crazy. One cool-looking, long-haired guy smells of everything – a thick, complex waft following him onto the bus. I think of Harry Potter's every-flavour beans, and as with taste, everything combined does *not* make a good scent. Someone else pushes past smelling improbably of salad – a strong aroma of lettuce. I can't recall so many people smelling so much, or such a diverse array of stink. An efficient agent who seems to speak every language sells us tickets. She doesn't smell of anything, which becomes my new favourite fragrance.

Passengers settle in for the hour-long ride. Laughter erupts from the back of the bus. Kristen Wiig's character from SNL's *The Californians* is seated directly behind us. ("It's like, er, you know, shu-*huh*, er, *duh*!") I fish around for earbuds and lose myself in a playlist as scenery floats past the window: big sky, a few low buildings, dark volcanic cones, bubbles of land stretch-marked in camouflage. Blue horizon to our right. To the left, ashen cloud.

We hum along straight highway of crushed salt-and-pepper stone stacked thick on rocky tundra – road built for freezing. Huge plateaus abut blue steppes with snowy claw-marks down steep embankments, remnants of avalanche. Pyramid shapes with military flattops – mountains with buzz-cuts. Now a wide bay opens to the north with a small ship at its centre. Another compact settlement. A skein of ducks in flight. An absence of trees. Small tidal inlets and rocky pools. Sun breaks through, up for the season, intensifying landscape colours. Inside the bus, Crazy Old Hippy's defied long odds and made a friend.

There’s a monstrous raven sitting on a light standard and we pass a road sign stating, “Town of Vikings.” I glance at my calendar. Yesterday was Wednesday – Odin or Woden’s Day. Today is Thor’s Day. Tomorrow belongs to Frey – Odin’s wife. And we’re here until the day of Odin’s son, Tiw. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday – remnants of Viking time.

Industrial buildings and Reykjavik’s port take up the view as we near the city’s perimeter – structures in bright red and white, a northern settlement feel, only larger. Yanni plays through my earbuds as a gull sweeps by, my current playlist: *Dare to Dream, You Only Live Once* and *A Love for Life*. I wonder if I ought to be listening to Björk but the sweeping instrumentals suit the landscape, and my frame of mind. Aptly enough we’re greeted by a smoky bay – the meaning of Reykjavik – a cloud-like mist, maybe vog, reminiscent of haar.

Finally we reach the central bus depot, shoulder packs, and meander through town. “Iceland’s capital,” I read, “is not so much a small city as a cosmopolitan village.” Town centre blends alpine and maritime, distinctly Scandinavian. Hairy backpackers shuffle about like northern sloths and yetis. A disproportionate number of bars and restaurants line the streets. People complain about prices but it doesn’t seem to keep them away. Maybe everyone’s a tourist. It’s hard to tell. Conversations burble in an array of language but everyone’s similarly attired – puffy bundles of warm clothing – anyone could be from anywhere.

Making our way to our accommodation takes us past Grófin, where Reykjavik’s first settlers beached their boats, and then Adalstraeti, Reykjavik’s first road, a path those same Vikings used to access moorage a thousand years ago. Our apartment-hotel has an industrial feel – concrete and glass, spartan but welcoming. After venturing out for overpriced groceries, we settle back into our unit, getting local with a hearty plokkfiskur, traditional crustless fish pie. Which we wash down with weak beer and sulphury water, having passed on Iceland’s popular soda called Krap.

Next day breaks in bright overcast – gleaming gray in bone-chilling cold. This may be the weather for the season. We start our day at the ruins of a

Viking Age farmhouse in the centre of town – Reykjavik's Settlement Exhibition. According to the *Book of Icelanders*, written in 1125, Norwegian Ingólfur Arnarson was the first settler. Unlike most, he arrived and stayed for good. As his ship approached the island he cast his high seat pillars into the sea, vowing to build where the wood floated ashore – an effective maritime trick to learn currents and where driftwood's likely to accumulate. The pillars washed into this smoky bay – Reykjavik, where Ingólfur and his party built their homestead. More Norse followed – farmers and settlers, but it remains uncertain as to what drove the first migration – flight from Norwegian King Harald Fairhair or planned by that same monarch? Perhaps the familiar Scandinavian thirst for new land and adventure. Regardless, the excursion was well organized, an abundance of resources and slaves amongst the first wave of Icelanders.

Now surrounding ground is higher, earth and construction built up over time, and we descend stairs from the street to the museum – the farm's foundation. Lighting's dim, as though entering the longhouse when first built, illumination from pit fires and small open chimneys. Norwegian whetstones are placed around the interior. There's a bronze axe head – quintessentially Viking, along with a spear tip and a key, simple yet sophisticated. Bits of wood carved with runes are displayed, their meaning still unknown. These aren't replicas. We're experiencing eleven- and twelve-hundred-year-old artifacts. Plaques describe historical snapshots as we make our way over rough floor, the look and feel of natural earth and rock. "Vikings were raiders and traders," one reads. Another describes the significance of Viking shipbuilding, the first European ships to ply open water, expanding the world beyond river and shoreline travel. And there's a natural rock wall, part of an outbuilding that housed animals – stone the colour of Sedona. Maps and more artifacts draw us around the low-ceilinged room. Computer-generated images of the building and surrounding land adorn interior walls. Ghostly figures appear, go about day-to-day activities, and vanish.

We read of Auður Ketilsdóttir, wife of King Ólafur, the Viking who conquered and ruled Dublin. Later, when Ólafur fell in battle, Auður went to the Hebrides. Auður's son Thorstein followed in his father's warrior-king footsteps, conquering half of Scotland before he too fell in battle. With the death of her husband and son, Auður fled from Caithness to

Orkney – the same path as fist-shaking Johnnie – before her journey paralleled ours as she landed here in Iceland.

More panels inform us of the rise and gradual decline of Vikings – Scandinavian markets thriving through the ninth century with trade in fur and skins, amber, soapstone, whetstones and walrus tusk ivory. An example of this was Sweden's Hedeby Island, an economic hub with merchants travelling from as far as Arabia. Another plaque tells us the Viking Age came to an end when Christianity prevailed – the religious invasion of the Catholic Church. Or with the 1066 defeat of Norway's King Harald by England's King Harold (for which keeping track becomes both easy and complicated). Followed immediately by William the Conqueror's victory at Hastings. But as a direct descendant of Norse Duke Rollo, I feel William's invasion in fact renewed the Viking Age, rebooting assimilation that never concluded but merely diminished with time, possibly with Sweden's declining dominance at Eurovision and ABBA fading from the charts.

Adjacent to the Settlement Exhibit we happen upon a serendipitous find – the Sagas, on loan from the University of Iceland for a short time. *The Book of Icelanders* and *The Book of Settlements* are on display – original manuscripts, written in the twelfth century by Ari Thorgilsson, Ari the Wise. These books are this nation's history, an account of families, politics, legend and law – touchstones akin to the Bible and Magna Carta – providing insights from ninth-century settlements to the Christian era. Oliver claims that despite substantial caches of silver and gold found in places like Gotland, Sweden, the most valuable treasures of the Age are these Icelandic Sagas.

Encased in cubes of glass and elevated to reading height, the books resemble larger versions of my soaked copy of *Vikings*. But the Sagas look this way not from cheap red wine but centuries of use, sea air and human handling. The display room's dimly lit, the mood sombre, secretive. Each bound book has its own pedestal, a solitary spotlight igniting leather, velum and faded ink, open and marked with coarse ribbon. Intricate artwork – illumination – tops the open page like a coloured header. I have the exhibit to myself and soak up the energy as best I can, knowing the contents of those buckled pages – a country's genealogy, stories of wealth, power, murder and love.

ICELANDIC FOOD TOUR

We meet up with Arni, our guide for a food tour around the city. It's just the three of us and we start at the info centre, where we're given food. Initially we're unsure how to proceed but there's not much to figure out. Arni gestures to the table. This is food. You eat it.

A native Icelander, he's a man of few words. Like a lot of locals, Arni's well-educated – a subsidized university degree from continental Europe, fluent in a few languages, working three part-time jobs to make a living, one of which incorporates tourism. This seems to be the national norm. Somehow Arni pronounces his name with three-and-a-half syllables. I try but end up sounding like Arnie Schwarzenegger, with a speech impediment. In keeping with his countrymen, Arni – *our* Arni – is fiercely proud of his lineage, coming from a well-documented fifty-generation family tree. This seems typical of most Icelanders, along with conservation of words. No excess. Conversation includes what *needs* to be communicated, nothing more. Occasionally a joke is made – dry and to the point. Humorous, never funny.

We begin with dry seaweed and leaf bread, washed down with malt extract and Appelsin, a confusingly named orange drink – think Orange Crush with throat burning. And with that we begin a walk around town, passing the lot housing one of Reykjavik's last turf cottages, where Halldór Laxness set his Nobel Prize-winning novel *Brekkukotsannall* (*The Fish Can Sing)*. Then we stroll through the Radhus – Icelandic parliament, which houses a massive relief map of the island-country. It's a fantastic means of orientation and we get a clear visual of what to expect over the coming days – mountains and valleys, inlets and rivers, a truer sense than what we'd glean from a flat map or guidebook.

"Hello," Arni says to a man walking by.

"Hello," the man replies.

"That's the Minister of Justice," Arni says to us, and walks away.

We exchange a shrug and follow Arni past a mural and statue commemorating civil disobedience – an iron spike splitting a stone. It could be Excalibur wedged into the rock, awaiting Arthur to free it and his people. There's a statue of modern Iceland's founder, stoically marking the country's separation from Denmark in 1944. The city's peppered with

stern statues like this one, Icelandic pride intense, though most I find incapable of explaining the basis of that pride. And I refrain from pointing out most of the women who arrived with the original settlers were Irish and British Celts, making Icelandic blood as mongrel as all the UK.

We carry on and follow Arni to a curious seafood restaurant in the Old Harbour. It's a small café with the feel of a diner – a couple of tables, chairs and a communal bench-style table. There's a startlingly lifelike statue of the late owner and I find myself looking back repeatedly, his unblinking stare exuding energy. (When we leave Deb admits being aware of his ghost.)

We're served the traditional taste of Iceland – what they show TV travellers retching on. It's Greenland shark that's been buried in rock and pressed earth, where it ferments in its own toxins for eight weeks, then hung and air-dried for an additional nine months. Cold, arid gales make Iceland ideal for drying fish and game, a boon to survivalist settlers. The dry fermented shark's cut into dice-sized cubes and set on a plate between us, pierced with toothpicks and served with a bottle of Brennivin, the liquor-strength burnt-wine known as Black Death. It's herbaceous like Jägermeister, clear and powerful. We start with the fish cubes, rubbery, dense and cloudy white.

"You chew them just a couple of times, then swallow. They can't be chewed up," Arni explains.

I was prepared for something much worse. It's more texture than flavour, and I could imagine gnawing away on a piece for an afternoon, like fishy gum. Then Arni pours us a healthy dram of the accompanying liquor. I shoot one and sip the next, enjoying an immediate buzz. The next course arrives: thin slabs of air-dried haddock stacked on a plate like crisp flatbread. This gets spread with salted butter, treated like the toast it resembles. It's delicious and addictive. Then we're served what Arni explains is traditional fish soup – lobster bisque with small, soft chunks of lobster-meat, simple but flavourful, ideal for cold weather.

The only other diner in the restaurant strikes up a conversation. He's a west coast American, here permanently, and is having a fin whale steak. On his plate it looks like thin sirloin beefsteak.

"I'm not much of a meat eater," he says. "And I know, I know. But these are really good. You should try it. Get it medium rare. And try the hotdogs

they sell on the street. They're not like hotdogs you're used to. It's real food. They use lamb."

Arni nods. "Lamb, yes. Our hotdogs are very good."

We stroll from the restaurant, pleased with what we've tried, and carry on through the Old Harbour, a compact working port – no pleasure craft. Arni points to the pier.

"See over there?" he says. "Whale-watching boats on the right, whaling-hunting boats on the left. They hate each other." He shrugs. "Always controversial."

A chunky coastguard vessel sits in the harbour, a monster resembling an ice breaker. More rescue happens here than defence. Iceland's police force is small. There's no army. Whether this speaks to peacefulness, isolation or indifference, I can't say. We enjoy a roundabout walk, weather holding cold and gray. I ask Arni about his country.

"There's debate," he replies. "About the EU, the currency, resource exploitation, sovereignty." He concludes with a shrug. The same issues, I suspect, debated at Viking assemblies a thousand years ago. Arni points out the hotdog place we need to try and then we make our way to Laugavegur, Reykjavik's pedestrian thoroughfare. We pass a bronze plaque in the street, "Hub of Reykjavik," then settle into a stale smoke-saturated English pub. Arni calls instructions to a server who brings us small samples of local beer. To this Arni rattles off a barrage of Icelandic and, despite a level demeanor, he's clearly giving the server hell. This continues for a while, more words than we've heard him use so far, and the server scuttles away, returning with big glasses of the same beer: Brio (named for a local artist), Sólbert (a fruit beer), amber Skål, and cloudy wheat beer.

Arni begins to open up. Maybe it's the booze. He's still far from effusive but sharing more. The tour's clearly an opportunity for him to eat and drink his fill. He reveals an album of his photos – local landscapes – and then describes puffin hunting, which he's done with a friend. Standing on cliff edges, he explains, armed with long-handled nets, they scooped birds from the sky midflight – flapping balls of feather and muscle.

"Like butterfly nets," he says, extending his arms like he's holding a golf club and swooping them in a horizontal figure-eight. "I ski and hike all the

time. But that was the most demanding thing I've done. Very tiring."

"Are they strong?" I ask.

"Oh yes. Very."

I ask about the Blue Lagoon, a popular tourist activity that doesn't really appeal but I want to make sure we're not missing something "imperative."

Arni shakes his head. "It's industrial waste water," he says. "The power plant makes the water that colour. It's not clean. I'd never swim there." He makes a face. "Never."

We finish most of our beer and leave, but not before Arni gives the server another tongue-lashing in Icelandic. She seems unconcerned. Next he takes us to a deli where we taste local cheese: blue, Gouda and Brie, with charcuterie of cured lamb and smoked goose breast dipped in sweet vinaigrette.

"Are you adventurous?" the friendly clerk asks us. We nod yes and she adds cured horse fillet to our tasting plate. It's all delicious and we buy more to take back to our unit.

Sun breaks through and we extend our tour, climbing a modest hill to Reykjavik's massive Lutheran church – the Hallgrimskirkja, by far the tallest building in the city. A steep sloping tower, it looks like a space shuttle on end, only twice as big and made of pale concrete, stark as the surrounding land. Leif Erikson's out front, a statue that is on his own towering plinth. A plaque reads, "Leifr Eiricsson – Son of Iceland – Discoverer of Vinland." I smile at the brevity. How did a people who hardly use any words manage to write all those Sagas?

The kirk's interior is handsome, simply appointed. Grand in scale, not decor. A place of worship rather than pageantry. Bells sound as we leave, booming chimes that don't seem to fade. We cross the street to Café Loki, a coffee house named for the mischievous Norse god I liken to Kokopelli from the American Southwest, a perpetual prankster. But Loki was brutally punished by the other gods for his trouble-making. Legend states his tortured writhing is the cause of earthquakes. An elaborate painting adorns one wall – Norse mythology akin to Dante's *Inferno*, graphic and fantastical – something I'd expect to see air-brushed on a van in the 1970s.

"Our air is so clean, so clear," Arni says, snapping my attention from the wall art. "We can see the glacier one hundred kilometers away." Now

sun’s beaming into the coffee house, hot and bright. “I hope to go skiing later,” he adds.

“Where do you go?” I ask.

“Over there,” he says, indicating the glacier, I think.

A server sets a tray on our table – strong, French press coffee, buttered bread and rye bread ice cream, the taste like Christmas – sweet, savoury and spicy. Arni points back toward the harbour, suggesting Deb and I go to Grotta Lighthouse for midnight sunset.

“It’s very nice,” he adds, as though we need convincing. To which we smile and make noncommittal noises, knowing we’ll be asleep long before that.

GOLDEN CIRCLE – GULLFOSS, GEYSER AND THINGVELLIR

Today we explore the island, doing Iceland’s Golden Circle – a full day excursion of nature and culture. Morning weather’s surprisingly clear and sunny. Our day starts with breakfast of smoked halibut and salmon on buttered flatbread – proper Icelandic fare – followed by showers and coffee, both distinctly sulphury. Tap water’s instantly hot, the entire island, it seems, a geothermal heat source, like New Zealand’s Rotorua, the perpetual aroma of rotten eggs and fart.

A small bus meets us at the apartment. Fellow passengers are an eclectic mix of tourist-travellers. The driver greets us, checks a list and mumbles into a mic, the incomprehensible sound of an airline pilot. We drive through town, winding past the university, library, museum and the landmark Pearl building, with towering Hallgrimskirkja visible from everywhere. Something crackles on the mic and audio’s suddenly clear. Our driver’s name is Albert. Not really, but Albert is what we’re asked to call him, his real name being an unpronounceable Icelandic run-on sentence. Albert it is, then.

Iceland is all about fishing, energy and tourism, Albert explains as we approach the outskirts of town, glacial peaks rising around us with parkland and salmon-filled rivers. Not that we see the salmon. It’s what Albert says, and we take his word.

“Like Stockholm. It’s like that, you know,” he adds, and I think of an angler I watched there, casting for ocean char in the centre of Sweden’s capital.

As we pass a lake gleaming in sun Albert asks for introductions. We go around the bus: travellers from India, Scotland, the U.S. and us. “Twenty percent of Iceland emigrated to Canada,” Albert says. “It’s like that, you know.”

Scenery rolls by: hard, grass-covered magma, gnarly land in bumps and lumps and jagged snow-capped mountains that slowly get closer while fissures steam in the distance. Albert talks about the abundance of geothermal energy here. “It only costs me twenty-four-thousand krónur to heat my two-hundred-twenty-five square meter home,” he says. “It’s like that, you know.” I do the math: about two-hundred-and-fifty dollars. A *month*. So cheap is relative in the context of Iceland’s high cost of living. Which I catch myself thinking with Albert’s speech delimiter. (It’s like that, you know.)

Around us are rugged peaks with icy windswept snow and glacier-carved valleys, the magnitude overwhelming. We stop at an interpretive centre where we watch a frightening video of earthquake and volcano damage, then a display showing the results of a mild quake – a devastated kitchen – lethal shards of broken items strewn about the floor. Perhaps a mild torture day for Loki.

There’s a viewing spot – a hole in the floor, glassed over. Beneath us is a gap in the Earth, the rocky ledges of the tectonic plates – North America and Eurasia – currently separating, resulting in Iceland’s volatility. This stony break goes from here to South Africa, a crack in the world running all the way down. And it’s getting bigger. While fault lines like San Andreas grind together, this one pulls apart. Resulting quakes and tremors are equally violent, but here glacier-capped volcanoes add to the threat. Blasts blow steaming ice and ash into the stratosphere that shut down flight paths. Despite the magnitude of what we’re witnessing, we join a queue of travellers hamming it up for photos, one foot in North America, the other in Eurasia, straddling the transcontinental rift.

Back on the bus our route takes us east and slightly north, travelling on former seabed, the land now grassy and bare, dotted with the occasional creek, sheep, goat and modest building. In the distance sit the remnants of

Eyjafjallajökull, the glacial volcano that blew in 2010, halting air traffic and confounding international news anchors and meteorologists with its pronunciation. Albert points out a house at the base of a nearby mountain, the building surrounded by massive boulders that tumbled down in the resulting quake. The house was untouched. The odds of it surviving as it did are zero, the result, without injury, miraculous.

Ahead are old houses of stone and new ones in corrugated iron by an indigo lake and milky blue river. The lack of trees is striking.

“You notice the deforestation,” Albert points out as though reading my mind. “From making iron. It’s like that you know.” Firewood fuelled the forges, the result here like much of Scandinavian Europe, transition from savannah to forest and eventual deforestation, resource depletion an age-old dilemma. But further on is a low, dense forest of new growth – a green burst of optimism. Beyond that stands a bright red and green volcanic cinder cone, the look of a surly Christmas tree, festive and menacing.

A string of small uniform houses parallels the highway. “Those are summer homes,” Albert says. “Provided to workers by the unions.” The appeal of this location lies in average temperatures several degrees warmer than Reykjavik. No elevation change. The reason, proximity to hot-springs – land warmed from below.

Albert pulls over at our next stop, Faxi Falls, the name Icelandic for Horse’s Mane. Sun dazzles cascading water and we hike down a path of dry mud to enjoy it up close. The falls, a long wash of rumbling water, resembles the side of a liquid building two to three stories in height. At the base of the falls the river jogs sharply left, a sudden transition to calm, and wends away through arid brown tundra. The falls are stunning, refracting light in a jewelled curtain. The air’s cold, fresh and cleansing, like walking through icy misters. Following a brief but invigorating hike we’re back aboard our little bus.

Through sprawling fields of tussock we glimpse soft greens and browns of high desert. Greenhouses abut homes, optimizing short growing seasons. Crumbling hoodoo cliffs look on. Gray geese fly by, same as the smoked variety we dipped in vinaigrette. There are paddocks of farm animals, livestock directly descended from those arriving with settlers a thousand years ago. I wonder if they’re as proud as the humans. A sheep sorting wheel centres a field where shepherds drive scattered flocks from

common grazing ground, a multi-sectioned revolving door to separate animals from woolly chaos to organized herds, like an enormous Trivial Pursuit game-piece where every category's ovine.

Horses graze by a red barn. The Icelandic horse is a rare breed, changing colour with the season like equestrian leaves, from grays to browns, and has five gaits (not the usual four), including a fast amble – a near-gallop, so uniquely smooth riders demonstrate by holding a glassful of water as they ride without spilling.

We arrive at Gullfoss, the granddaddy of waterfalls – Niagara on a grander scale – two colossal steps of water with angled corners, the valley a sea of white on a rift of solid magma. The falls shift, changing shape as sun melds with the surge, illuminating mist and a deep crevasse in molten hues, the resulting effect being what gives the falls their name, meaning Golden Rainbow.

Gullfoss is remarkable but I prefer the understated beauty of Faxi – Miss Congeniality over Miss Universe. It's too busy – tourist-bus Grand Canyon meets Niagara – communing with nature nearly impossible. Although there's no gift shop or poncho-wearing newlyweds, compared to the isolated landscape the activity's overwhelming. We gawk a bit but move on, dodging crowds as best we can to savour a boardwalk stroll meandering with the terrain. Birdsong emanates from a muddy cliff where burrowed nests have been dug into mortar-like earth. A thumb-sized bee drones past, and with the throng at a distance it feels we've escaped a gaudy showing of "Nature!" to reconnect with the real thing once more.

Our next stop is Geyser, which some Brits pronounce Geezer. Ironically, just the elderly. But this is the original, what the rest are named after, set amidst spouting hot-springs, bubbling mud and thermal pools of indescribably clear jade-green. Surrounding ground is red and parched and I question the strength of this cracked, crumbly crust holding us over an earthen cauldron of boiling mineral water. More wonder and a sense of insignificance, more clean air and hundred-kilometer views to indigo glacial mountains.

We lunch on orangey Appelsin and a smoked lamb sandwich that tastes like cigarette. I imagine the smoking process – racks of lamb hung in a bingo hall, swinging over gamblers' heaped and smoldering ashtrays. Then it's back to the bus, the road, and on to Thingvellir National Park.

This is where the Althing took place – Iceland's general assembly – literally all things of significance. Here, land and history strike a dichotomy. Land's separating, plates pulling apart and rending the Earth like halving an orange. But this is where people – the Vikings, did the opposite, coming together, gathering and binding. With time, the Althing changed from general assembly to simply a court, law-speakers conducting the Greylag. It was The Hague and Brussels before modern nations – seed government formulating law in real time – debate and resolution, a template for the Western world. Now, the Icelandic government acknowledges every new country, irrespective of politics. All nations are recognized. Simple as that.

As our small bus climbs toward the park, the nation's birthplace, Albert slows to tell us of its sacredness, informing and warning at the same time. "Don't mess with our special place" implied, the softest threat beneath a courteous reminder. Now, a cliff wall of dark volcanic rock, high and long, runs across our field of vision. *Game of Thrones* films here, using this location for scenes at The Wall. Despite the show's computer-generation, what lies ahead is naturally stunning, the foundation of the fantasy.

At the wall's base the Öxará River feeds Lake Thingvallavatn, a snaking alpine creek and deep lake under bright blue sky. Sun's beaming and it's relatively warm – three layers versus the five we've been wearing since we arrived. Wisps of cirrus stream overhead. An Icelandic flag crackles in wind and a scattering of people traipse toward the sheer stone – pilgrimage – while others are visible atop the ridgeline. They could be cast as guards or archers, tiny from where we are. It's remarkably private. Bodies wrapped in fleece vanish into the land, disappearing in brown-tinged greens of boggy fields and swathes of tundra, the blue of lake and creek, sky and towering peaks with glacier crowns and the foreboding wall of dark rock. A million people could be lost here. Vast is an understatement. A gust of chill cuts through, the feel of ice in the sun.

As a meeting place for the Althing, Thingvellir made sense – high ground for views, level for camp and equality, the creeks and lake a veritable larder with ducks and geese, limitless drinking water and three kinds of Ice Age trout that still thrive. We stop to take pictures, the white noise of wind a soothing shush. A tern chases a raven in a black-and-white dogfight while a family picnics beside the creek, glacial water bubbling

like giggles, and a fly-fisherman in waders stands downstream, each cast the tempo of a sonnet.

We're at the site of Snorri's booth, named for Saga-Age Chieftain Snorri Thorgrimsson. Booths were camp shelters used during each summer's fortnight session of the Althing. Camp remains have been found along both banks of this river, new sites on old, making archeological tracing easy and accurate in preserved layers. Usually built of rock and turf with fabric over wood frames, booths were large and closely spaced – think heavy-duty, semi-permanent yurts with rock and earth foundations. Chieftains provided accommodation for their clan, while other Althing attendees used traditional teepees alongside the booths.

I stop to linger, envisioning a sea of tents, fires and cooking, laughter and shouting – a fur-clad Woodstock. I want to lose myself here but the wall pulls us forward, a gravitational yanking of legs in a near zombie lurch. Approaching the colossal stretch of basalt, wind softens and dies. It's toasty by the wall, a natural solar panel radiating heat, another reason this place made sense for gathering.

Reaching the base of the wall we climb a wide path of rock and dirt, tamped smooth with wind and centuries of footsteps. Snowy ridges stand beyond, while tussock, mossy rock and volcanic cones dot our surrounds. A landscape of uncanny blue, white and brown – familiar topography on a grander scale. Cleaner colors. Brighter sky. Too grand for pictures without helicopter or drone. A continuation of the crack separating Eurasia and America runs through this stretch. It's oddly becoming, a glimpse toward Earth's core. *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* was in fact filmed here, the heart of the Arctic Viking World.

We clamber back onto the bus for a long, winding drive back to Reykjavik, skirting a lake stormy with whitecaps, determined anglers at the perimeter, and I think of cod fishermen from Brixham, plying this coast in sailing trawlers, challenging wind and sea. As we drive, Albert shares legends of Iceland's Huldufólk, the Hidden People – magical beings that live in the land. We've witnessed this elsewhere. Celts and Gauls have Little People. Britain's home to countless ghosts. And long-dead spirits haunt Polynesia and North American plains. Ask any Icelander about their Hidden People and it won't be denied. Instead they

shrug. Keep an open mind. Why say such a thing doesn't exist? How can you know?

We pass an old stone home reinforced with turf – architecture unchanged since the first settlers. Another lake glides by, glacial water in aquamarine surrounded by squat, windswept trees. Arctic terns swoop and thrash the surface. Feeding? It's violent and beautiful.

Albert encourages us to try hot-spring baked bread if we get the chance – a process of slow baking in steam, similar to the boiled-baking of bagels. We tell him we will but he decides to take us instead and leaves the main road for an unscheduled stop, driving toward the lake dusted in flapping terns. There's a cafeteria, and with a string of Icelandic and an exchange of his own money, Albert buys a round loaf of hot-spring bread, dark and cylindrical like Bundt cake. He finds a knife and starts slicing thick wedges, passing them to me to butter in an impromptu assembly line. Another person grabs a knife and more butter and our little group gathers around to wolf it down. The bread's dense and moist, earthy and rich, slightly sweet – a comforting snack.

Within minutes we're back on the bus, driving through high plateaus. As we approach town, wildflowers appear, splashes of purple, and stout buildings grow in height and density around the harbour. Our day concludes with a detour to glimpse Yoko Ono's Imagine Peace Tower, commissioned, I believe, to commemorate her successful breakup of the Beatles.

REYKJAVIK

An overcast morning, back to cool air under gray sky. Kirk bells pierce Sunday calm, tumbling metallic chords. We walk to the Old Harbour in misty drizzle, a watery drape you can't quite break through. A small group gathers on the pier and we board *Skulaskeid*, a roly-poly, fifty-year-old boat lovingly called *Old Skulli*. Our guide's accent is a wonderful Australian-Icelandic hybrid, and he knows his birds exceedingly well.

We pull away from the port and head toward Engey, a low island just beyond the harbour. The city's visible behind us, sliding behind a bend of headland – Reykjavik Concert Hall, Hallgrimskirkja, the working port. A scattering of seabirds and waterfowl float by: fulmars, kittiwakes, black-

headed gulls, terns and eider ducks. Wind increases and the sea churns into lumps, mimicking a roiling stomach. Even gloved hands become cold and stiff. The thought of baiting lines or pulling nets, trolling or trawling for cod in this water makes me shiver even more, until we see what we've come for – puffins, bobbing on chop and taking flight like fast-flapping ducks – balls of black and white with flashes of rainbow beaks. It's satisfying, finally seeing these unique birds. Not as up-close-and-personal as we'd imagined, but fun all the same.

Our time in Iceland's winding down, and not anticipating being back we make a point of doing as much as possible for the remainder of our stay. We stand in line for hotdogs – European-style wieners of lamp and pork – served with crispy fried onion, mustard and remoulade. We walk the shoreline to the concert hall. There's a live performance underway, a fusion of traditional and modern music – imagine the sound of Abba performed by The Mamas and The Papas, lovely and melodic.

In the gift shop we're engaged by a tourist, an animated close-talker. She's American, friendly, nutty, Midwestern and Christian. (You decide how much of that's redundant.) After a while it's clear we may be trapped for good, so I point behind her to something that doesn't exist, and when she turns to look, we run.

Admiring Viðey Island across the harbour, we walk to the Sun Voyager – an aluminum sculpture of a longship resting by the water. Soft sunlight moves behind cloud and the sculpture changes from silver to gold, metallurgical transmutation. In *The White Road*, Edmund de Waal states, "Alchemy is donum Dei, a gift of God." If so then God's stopped here, gifting us with this gleaming sculpture. The boat's a fluid interpretation of oar-powered movement – inspiration for the work being the heart of Scandinavian exploration, dreamy voyages to unknown places. Following the adventurous path of Marco Polo, de Waal also describes experiencing civilization's northern fringe: "It is very melancholy. It is very cold. I love it." Again, like God, he could be here right now.

Snaking back through town, we wind down side streets around the towering gray kirk, crossing Thorsgata to Odinsgata – a Christian church by Thor and Odin's streets – an all-encompassing religious stroll, very Viking tenth-century. It's peaceful, Sunday quiet. Just a few skateboarders,

not completing tricks, the clatter of flipping boards and stumbling youths in big trainers. I catch myself silently praying for at least one to fall and hurt himself.

Deb goes back to the apartment and I go for Thai takeaway. Waiting for the food on my own, *All By Myself* plays on the stereo. I imagine Bridget Jones drinking too much wine, air-banding drums and find it very funny. I suspect I'm tired.

In the morning we cross town, a lengthy walk and gradual climb from the water to the National Museum of Iceland. A photo exhibit features Icelandic loners – individuals in rural settings – open country, mountains, farmland and sea, some sheep and dogs, a herder and craftsmen. Time moves slowly here, captured through the lens. According to the display this is Icelandic reality, how the world is, places unchanged. And like the people, everything has a story. It makes me think of every frontier settler, so often venturing west – following a setting sun, away from establishment and authority to seek independence, even isolation.

We move through the museum from rotating to permanent displays. Featured is a tiny bronze idol. Thor with a hammer? Jesus with a cross? It could be either, an illusion to be seen however one chooses. Ahead sits a church artifact – Thor and Jesus intricately carved together onto a wooden door and wall, like brothers. Transitional art, cautious in form. There's rune sticks and a king's burial contents – game pieces and dice. And an array of drinking horns and garments, a coarse old mitten (not a midden), brooches, tools in iron, an actual iron for ironing clothes that resembles a curling rock, a loom, buttons, oil lamps, swords and daggers, cutlery and huge stone sculptures.

In the museum cafeteria we drink dark coffee and rich hot chocolate. I peruse scribbles in my journal. *Sleeping in daylight remains discombobulating, combined with a city that doesn't sleep – it feels like shift work, without the work. Icelanders in a word: independent. On the cusp of the geological world I'm aware of earth's breathing – change achingly slow, then violently sudden.*

SAGA MUSEUM

One more stop to make, another mile marker on my trail – Reykjavik's Saga Museum – Iceland's history in wax. The website photos creeped me out, the look of a Madame Tussauds' house of horrors. But every landmark piece of the country's history is here in tidy vignettes, like learning the Koran or Torah in a dozen 3-D frames. I pay my fee and a heavy curtain's drawn back for me. There's no natural light and it feels like entering an underground club, something illegal and pornographic. I'm the only one here and I slip into the production of waxy stills, moving from room to gloomy room, back in time and myth.

Iceland's earliest human history starts with the arrival of Papist Christians known as papar, who left when Norwegian pagans arrived, fleeing in their wood and leather coracles. In their haste the papar left Irish books behind, a clue to their origins. Then came Hrafna-Floki – Raven-Floki – the first Viking to arrive and give Iceland its name. Ingolfur Arnarson followed, the owner of the farmstead at the Settlement Exhibit. Ingolfur was the first settler who lived out his life here, arriving with his wife Hallveig in 874 and completing construction of their farm in 877.

I shuffle through the scenes, exhibits like stage shows in stop-time, zapped with a freeze-ray. A gruff voice speaks through the headset of a hand-held audio-guide and I learn the steps of red-blasting, smelting swamp or bog iron, the basis of the Iron Age. Although never as strong or valuable as bronze, iron was easy to find and simple to work. Advancing trade, exploration, and the political landscape, this process changed the world:

1. Crush red clay.

2. Burn wood in furnace for red-hot charcoal.

3. Push red clay into charcoal-filled furnace.

4. When clay burning hot, blow air into furnace-hole with bellows.

5. Slide charcoal to centre, where it's hottest.

6. Push burning clay into hot centre; blow more air until ferrous material melts into nuggets.

7. Remove iron nuggets, reheat and beat impurities from the iron.

There's a likeness of master blacksmith Skalla-Grimur, a man of immense strength who dove to the ocean bed to retrieve a rock big enough

to beat smelted iron upon, and his son Egill, warrior and poet of the Saga Age. Egill's said to have buried a hoard of silver nearby, still unfound.

I carry on between rooms, dark to light, eyes refocusing at each display, rods to cones, learning historical snippets as I go. And I learn of Erik the Red's volva. Which I reread to ensure I haven't misunderstood. Turns out a volva is a seer. Not a Swedish car or lady bits as I'd thought. And in the same way one knew John Baker was John the baker, Erik's female seer was named Litil, and somewhat awkwardly known as Litilvolva. Perhaps better than Bigvolva. I cannot say for certain.

Next I see Freydís Eiríksdóttir, Erik's daughter – Leif Erikson's sister, who lived a few seasons with her small clan in Newfoundland at L'Anse aux Meadows. She tired of fighting natives, probably Beothuk or Mi'qmak, what the Vikings called skraelings or barbarians. Freydis herself was a vicious warrior – nearly a berserker, and single-handedly fought off an Indigenous war-party as they raided her settlement. Following a few, violent years in the New World, she sailed home.

I move on, light dimming and eyes adjusting. As light brightens I go blind once more and wait until a man comes into focus. A prone man – Chief of the pagan Vikings, abed in his booth at the Althing. He's pensive. It's the dawn of the second millennium and the Christian Chiefs, early adopters of the new faith, have left it up to this man to decide the fate of their country's religious future – whether to keep the Old Gods or switch to the nailed one. And after a day and night of contemplation he decides all should be Christian. This takes place officially in the year 1000 – a national move to Christianity. It's understood people will worship the gods they choose but must do so in private. As Christianity swept Europe, joining the bandwagon made sense, avoiding war and saving resources. Politics and economics trump beliefs.

The next freeze-frame in my stop-motion tour shows Snorri Sturluson, the great writer, practised in politics and finance. He wrote the *Prose Edda*, *Heimskringla* and *Egilsaga*, literary classics of the Saga Age. A Chieftain from the city of Borg, Snorri was the lead law-speaker at the Althing for multiple years, indicative of uncommon wisdom. He was held in the highest regard, until he pissed off the king and was killed in 1241 – a sudden end to a lofty Viking life.

As I near the museum exit the setting changes to fifteenth century, late Middle Ages. Death's less bloody but still gruesome. Black Death arrives in Iceland, devastating the country. It was not yet a boozy drink to wash down rotten shark.

Now I'm in the last room, the museum's final historical scene. It's 1550. The Icelandic Reformation's taken place with a poor but ultimately successful beheading of Iceland's last Catholic Bishop. According to my audio guide it took four blows – not a good beheading by any standards. Somewhere Walter Raleigh gives his severed head a disappointed shake.

But with the Reformation and Christianity all laws, previously memorized by Law-Speakers, were written. Printing presses arrived in the country in 1530, entrenching Iceland's literary legacy. A plaque reads, "As the Christian tendency to write things down strengthened the Norse tradition of storytelling, a new kind of literature emerged. Called sagas from the Old Norse verb segja (to speak), the stories described events in the homelands and Iceland stretching back to the 800s. Two of them, T*he Vinland Sagas*, immortalize the role of Erik the Red and his family with the Norse discovery of America in A.D. 1000." A tidy, circular conclusion to a swath of Viking history.

On my way out I stop in the gift shop, a small room with trinkets and costumes for families to don for period pictures. A big Viking in wax with long red hair stands smiling, permanently posed for pictures. I lean in for a selfie. The result is one of my favourite photos, ever. We both sport goofy grins as though we've been caught misbehaving, my waxen friend seemingly taking the shot.

Leaving Reykjavik, we walk to the airport shuttle in chill, blowing drizzle, feeling fortunate the rain's as light as it is. Last night's downpour was chunky – sleet-like, horizontal, and bitterly cold. Ah, summer nights in Reykjavik, reminiscent of the Mark Twain line, "The coldest winter I ever spent was a summer in San Francisco!" Or I could call on romantic writer Thomas Merton, who calls the sound of night rain "wonderful, unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech." And, perhaps most wonderful, it keeps douches on skateboards indoors. Now safely aboard the airport shuttle, I gaze once more at frozen tundra, icy basalt and terns in Arctic monochrome, wondering if this chill will ever leave my bones.

Highlands and Islands

Scotland had a paradoxical beauty – its landscape was both lovely and severe.

—Paul Theroux, *The Kingdom by the Sea*

REYKJAVIK TO SKYE

I'm driving on the wrong side, navigating pyramids – sky-scraping peaks thrown and turned with time, the potter's wheel somewhere below. These are Scotland's Munros, mountains of three thousand feet or more. Which doesn't sound like much, having grown up around mountains. But there's something remarkable here. Munros are mammoth. Sprawling flat land cut radically by solitary peaks – isosceles of towering rock. This slab of continent is some of Earth's oldest rock. Maybe that's it. Raw and primordial. With nothing else around. Narrow road meanders through the lonely giants, more striking than a mountain range. Or maybe it's that we're at the base of every one, gawking skyward. This is where Bond drove M in the Aston Martin on their way to Skyfall. Adele crescendos in my head and I appreciate his home's name even more. We stop repeatedly for photos, each peak inspiring and intimidating. But with miles to cover, we drag ourselves on.

Today we returned to Scotland, flying from Reykjavik to Glasgow. Now we're in a rented car, driving up the west side of the country through treed glens, around lochs and high stony bens. We bisect Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park, then cut through volcanic highlands. I stop the car once more to take pictures at Glen Coe. Another towering isometric mountain across the narrow road – one lane each way. It's quiet and I saunter to the other side. There's an arched stone bridge over a trickling creek – something from a fairy-tale, home for a troll. Between creek and road is a stone beehive – a slate igloo without the crawlspace entryway. There's no mortar, a primitive style of building called a broch – what monks would erect on islands devoid of timber. Construction looks simple. It's not. How *does* one stack rocks into a hollow dome? I can't tell

how old this one is. I've seen photographs of them from the earliest days of Celtic Christianity that look exactly like this, but stones are good at hiding their age. These structures seemingly withstand everything. The light's no good for a photo so I do my best to commit it to memory. And wonder what it's like inside.

Passing Fort William we make our way toward Skye Bridge, which will take us to the Isle of Skye, our second Virginia Woolf bookend, setting of her lighthouse novel. But before we do I've another stop to make – the castle of Eilean Donan. The structure belongs in a painting, and in fact appears in countless travel brochures and calendars. Picture perfect – if such a thing exists, a thirteenth-century castle set on a promontory meeting-point of three highland lochs. The approach snakes around blind bends, offering tantalizing, peek-a-boo views. I wouldn't be surprised to see wizards hurling fireballs from the parapets, the surest way to keep ogres at bay.

There's evidence of a Christian monastic cell and fort here as early at the seventh century. The heaviest, lasting fortification was erected in the 1200s, ringing the small island or eilean on the Celtic Lord's boundary, built to defend against Norse raiders – latter-Age Vikings. This area was home to the Matheson clan. The Chief's son, it was said, communicated with birds. Armed with his gift he went abroad – viking in his way – adventuring overseas, gaining wealth and renown. Upon his return, King Alexander II of Scotland had the bird-whisperer construct this castle, designed to defend the realm from the very behaviour that financed it.

BEN TO GLEN AND BACK AGAIN

It's my ninth birthday. I unwrap a gift, a book – Hardy Boys, *The Secret Agent on Flight 101*. It's my first in the series, a bit of a challenge to read, some words new to me. I thought, for example, a jalopy was a fancy car. I wasn't fond of Aunt Gertrude. And when the boys' father, Fenton Hardy, flew on a mission to northwest Scotland, to the Hebrides, I believed he was going to a place called the He-brides, pronounced like He-Man. Regardless, I spent the rest of my childhood (and beyond) reading all the Hardy Boys mysteries. I even got the *Hardy Boys' Detective Handbook* – an invaluable resource to a boy solving cases around home and school, as one does. But it was that first read, *Flight 101*, and the allure of those

rugged mystical islands off the coast of Scotland, that remained, a memory resonating with the allure of adventure. Now I'm here, in the actual Hebrides. The pronunciation's changed, but the place still has me excited as a nine-year-old.

It's been a full day in the car, navigating west Scotland roads and roundabouts, bens, glens, lochs and forests. This western part of Scotland – Mull to Skye and north to Cape Wrath, is Argyll, home of the powerful Duke of Clan Campbell and, I presume, his stylishly patterned socks. This area – north and west Scotland, received some of the earliest and most frequent Viking raids and eventual integration. Place names are predominantly Norse. Here, Viking farmers introduced barley and oats – now traditional Scottish grains – as well as flax – its seeds used for oil, its fibers spun to make linen, rope and sail-cloth. Rich herring shoals were caught in nets of spun flax. Viking longhouses of stone, wood and turf were most often built on pre-existing foundations – the inclination of new civilizations to build on old, maybe utilizing the best land, a sign of conquest, or perhaps a more spiritual draw – human energy in the very roots of a place.

We cross Skye Bridge onto the Isle of Skye and make our way north and west. Our accommodation's a tiny house called the Snug on a farm outside Edinbane overlooking tidal Loch Greshornish. We bump up a long driveway past sheep and goats, crunching on potholed, loose gravel. Our host Lisa, a farmer, ambles out to greet us. Our tiny new home's well-stocked, like the best camper ever, but solid walls on slab foundation. She wishes us good night, we build a fire in the wood burner, and sleep.

Following one of the world's best slumbers I step outside to get my bearings. A small farmstead – sheep, horses, chickens and a Collie keen to herd whatever's around, a likable mutt named Razz. Or Jazz. I'm not sure and it doesn't seem to matter. Razz/Jazz is too busy to socialize.

We explore Trotternish Peninsula in the car, passing a turf-roof home we watched being built on TV's *Grand Designs*. We stop at Skye Brewery in the village of Uig, mostly so I can say Uig, and buy Black Porter and Scullie Ale, the latter in memory of sailing aboard Old Skulli in

Reykjavik. From Uig we drive into the Red Hills called Cuillins and hike the Quiraing, or rather, start to hike the Quiraing – a gargantuan bowl of glacier-carved land with rocky outcrops and natural stone towers. It's lunar but lush, dark metamorphic rock – schist and gneiss, under green mossy grass. The scale's unnerving, crags frighteningly big and violently windswept. According to Theroux, "sharp-pointed, fantastic, and high, like peaks in dragon stories."

We start on a narrow path of rock and dirt, a jaw-dropping rise on one side and knee-locking plummet on the other. My head swims. Anyone *not* vertiginous here must be hard-wired differently. Creeping ahead for a while we snap breathtaking photos before slowly, cautiously returning to the car. I'm reminded of slinking away from the Coast Path – St Ives to Zennor – in gut-rattling wind. Disappointing but prudent. I hang onto the fact we experienced this climb to a degree, and come across a local's description of where we are: "Imagine walking along a wide window sill a couple of floors from the top of Canary Wharf and you won't be far away. Add into the equation a few obstacles in the shape of portable TV–sized boulders and you're even closer. Tilt the whole arrangement so that, at times, you're making your way up something that's a similar angle to your house's roof and you're spot on. Nothing could have prepared me for such an experience, for the utterly terrifying exposure of it all and yet, at the same time, the freedom and exhilaration of such a high level scramble."

Back in the car we follow Skye's peninsular coast. Kilt Rock is our next stop, a colossal cliff with folds like pleated fabric dropping hundreds of feet to the sea. Creag an Fheilidh in Gaelic, it's "The Rock with a Kilt-like Appearance." Also known as Staffin, Norse for "Place of Pillars," a stunning stretch of Jurassic, fossil-rich coast that today is busy with people. A crew's shooting something for film or TV with too big a budget. Drones hum overhead and vanloads of bearded Germans stand around, smoking and sullen. Teamsters and film crews, it would seem, are the same everywhere.

We hurry away from the chaos to Loch Mealt and it's as though we've run the gauntlet, for up the road we're delivered to a peaceful paradise. A short hike from a dirt carpark takes us away from everything. There's a panoramic ocean view, pristine beach far below, and high waterfalls around a bend in the land which we descend to get a craning view.

Perhaps the beauty's enhanced by our distance from surly Germans and droning drones.

Rejuvenated, we carry on driving. The Old Man of Storr stands at attention on a rise – a huge pinnacle of stone raised like a cautioning finger. A jet fighter passes over, silent, and a few moments later its roar booms by with a shudder. Further on we stop and hike Scorrybreac through fields of wildflowers and trees abutting the sea, a pleasing loop in a range of topography.

Despite fatigue we drive to the local, the Edinbane Inn. It's Wednesday – traditional music jam-night at the pub, in full swing when we arrive. The musicians are seated at the only reserved table, quaffing pints and playing fiddle, mandolin, guitar and bodhrán, the Celtic skin-drum. A server serves a platter of food, clears a table, then joins in, tuning another fiddle and rounding out instrumentation with some lead. Everyone's here for the music, pulling chairs round to face the players, now in silent concentration. Silent verbally that is. The music's vibrant, toe-tapping and engaging – what you'd expect to hear at a Gaelic cèilidh. It's what I imagined in the car on Orkney, listening to BBC Scotland on a Saturday night.

On the drive back to the Snug we park at the foot of the loch to watch sun set in shades of pink. Mosquitoes and midges swarm through open car windows and we decide photos through glass will suffice. Crushing bugs as best we can, we go home and scratch ourselves to sleep.

Next day we make our way across Skye's Waternish Peninsula to Coral Beach and Neist Point Lighthouse. Colours at Coral Beach burst like a grounded rainbow of seaweed and shells – striped limpets and iridescent snails, others the colour of candy corn. I scoop a handful of beach that could be the contents of a miniature aquarium – coral like tiny antlers and miniscule shells in every possible shape. We hike a short steep rise to a plateau for a picnic of bacon sandwiches and views of the loch where a herd (or pod, your choice) of seals frolic directly offshore – slapping tails and flippers, barking and gawking – fifty sets of doleful eyes staring at us from the shallows.

From here we go for tea and cake, then drive treacherous one-lane road ten miles to Neist, and once more, like the Quiraing, bask in vast views – too much for photos to grasp, almost more than we can. Land shaped by

ice and wave – original earth, forced skyward as the world cooled. This is some of the very first rock, solidified from gas and liquid three-and-a-half billion years ago, to be found only in Australia, Africa and here in West Scotland. It's a demanding walk down, then up, and down again, all steep. Somehow the return hike becomes entirely uphill – a shift from quads to calves and lungs. Back in the vehicle we follow a detour into a hamlet, buy smoked haddock chowder that we eat in the car and take a hunk of rhubarb crumble home for dessert.

On our little wooden patio I sip Skye Ale and listen to unfamiliar birds and bleating sheep. Light softens as sun lilts west. Beyond the farm an idyllic length of road curves away, vanishing over a rise – a life-choice metaphor. I want to light a fire in the hearth and stay, living like this, in a tiny house on a farm with mountain and water views, hikes, birdsong, fresh eggs and a welcoming local with good live music. Aside from the birds and sheep, it's heart-stoppingly quiet.

Next day takes us south to the Cuillin, Glenbrittle, the Oyster Shed and Portree: the Cuillin being a climb, Glenbrittle a walk, the Shed a lunch – paper plates of rock oysters, crab, lobster and scallops. And the pretty town of Portree (Port-*Ree*) is a community of old buildings and shops on a steep bayside. The car radio picks up Portree's local station. For a while we assume it's Gaelic, then realize it is, in fact, English – heavily brogued, Englishish. We pass the whisky distillery of Talisker, a fine single malt we drank in Chichester, a tasty, unnecessary nightcap.

Back at the Snug we eat salmon – hot smoked in Drambuie and maple – venison salami, blue cheese and Skye Black Porter. Evening sun breaks through, brightening fields into a rolling green palette. A musical score of songbirds kicks in with a cuckoo taking a solo over harmonies of braying sheep. Again I'm drawn to the gently curving road leading … where? I hear Deepak Chopra speak of infinite possibility – pure potentiality, and lose myself down the asphalt bend.

Our little cabin home has a washing machine and doing laundry suddenly becomes a luxury, a break from scrubbing clothes in a sink. Automation feels decadent. Stepping outside I admire the surroundings. Dots shift in the distance, the movement of sheep. Just off our balcony I pet a ram – one of Lisa's prize wool-producers – a spool of its thread fetches twelve pounds, she explained. (Twenty dollars per spool!) The ram

leans against its wire fence and lanolin pillows protrude through the mesh in plush rows and columns.

Back inside I do some precooking – picnic food or post pub snacks, starting with eggs. There's an unlimited amount – not from Twatt but Lisa's big red hens that lay them extra-large and feathery. These I fry up with fat rashers of side bacon. Laundry tumbles, food sizzles, and I enjoy a mental caesura. We've been going for six weeks, jamming each day with activities, and it feels as though we need a rest from vacation. So we agree to simply do what's most important to us, committing to downtime on the island of Mull.

With chores in hand, I saunter outside to visit with Paul, Lisa's husband, who helps run the farm as well as another business, doing their best to make a living on Skye. Paul's a musician and plays regularly. As soon as he got his own business, he explains, the first thing he did was let his hair grow.

"I worked for an American company," he says. "They made me cut my hair, shave my beard. I said when the time's right, I'll grow it again. The time was right one year ago." He smiles, resembling a bearded Alan Doyle from Great Big Sea – radiating energy and musicality, then adds, "You won't get rich here. You work hard – busy all the time, but it's worth it. You have a bad day, then come home to this." He gestures to the hills and loch, bathed in setting sun. "Your blood pressure drops. It's good."

Paul's on his way to jam with his son and some friends – seventies hard rock – but before he does he calls Richard, his neighbour, and has him sign and give me one of his novels, a numbered first edition. I try to pay but he won't hear of it. It's an excellent read – a murder mystery set here on Skye, the protagonist a thinly veiled version of the author – a financial adviser who'd rather hike and fish and drink whisky with a friend than work with people's money. This I understand.

Today we leave Skye, admittedly saddened. It's a special place. Which can be said of most places but not always. Something here fits for us. Conversations of returning, staying, seem more substantive than holiday wishfulness. Once more I call upon Wordsworth, who wrote the following:

I love a public road: few sights there are

That please me more – such object has had power

O'er my imagination since the dawn

Of childhood, when its disappearing line

Seen daily afar off, on one bare steep

Beyond the limits which my feet had trod,

Was like a guide into eternity,

At least to things unknown and without bound

Reading this I realize, that's it! *That's* the road I've been gazing at – curving, questioning – stretching toward possibility. Leaving me with a kinship to Wordsworth for describing this lingering vista, this state of mind, so very well.

SKYE TO MULL

It's early. Back in the vehicle, we've crossed Skye – east then south and west again, now aboard a car ferry from Armadale to Mallaig. On the mainland we drive south to a sandy beach at Morar – marram dunes with soft silver sand, the kind that demands you slow down – literally grabbing hold and begging you to stay. We walk a sandy trail from estuary to open water – views familiar from *Local Hero*, the Burt Lancaster film that makes you want to quit your job, throw away neck ties and move to northern Scotland.

From Morar we drive through Arisaig and on to Glenfinnan where Bonnie Prince Charlie rallied the Highlanders to a futile last stand in 1745. There's a tall monument, moving and prideful, on the shore of Loch Shiel. It makes you want to fight, as desperate as Morar's white sand – a clinging hold that inevitably falls away. Turning from the monument our view is a splayed valley, a green bowl cut by the river that feeds the loch. Here a nineteen-arch viaduct carries trains across the gorge, including the Jacobite Steam Train, better known as Harry Potter's Hogwarts Express.

We backtrack to the main road then head south, across the Ardnamurchan Peninsula on forty long miles of single-lane road, busy with maniacally fast traffic. It's winding, steep and blind. I'm able to follow a car for twenty-five miles, both of us eventually stopping at a

scenic viewpoint. Exiting our cars, the other driver and I approach each other, shaking heads like veterans who've seen too much.

"Your turn to lead now," he says. "That's scary."

I ask him where he's from.

"Just over there," he says.

It turns out he's done this drive before, so I feel less bad for being intimidated. As it happens, "Just over there" means a couple of hundred miles, but he's essentially local. Suffice to say, it's an uncomfortable, demanding drive. I take my turn leading the rest of the way and we end up visiting on the ferry, two couples enjoying the view from the deck. She's Scottish and he's Welsh, and he explains they endure the drive regularly to come camping on Mull. They travel a lot but agree it's as lovely here as anywhere.

"Where you been?" he asks. "Where you going?"

I tell him we'd like to see the whole country but only if he's willing to drive lead on the terrifying roads. He lets out a hearty, head-back guffaw that makes me like him a great deal. This carries on. He's an easy laugher, and the two are a pleasure to visit with – genuine people, interested and interesting. Before long the ferry docks at Mull – Scotland's Inner Hebrides, a favourite destination for Orcadian Viking raiders from the ninth to twelfth centuries. With smiles and waves we part ways, our pace-car carrying on alone.

Our accommodation on Mull is in Tobermory. Driving through town to the guest house means navigating an agonizing switchback or two, the kind you wonder if the car will bottom out or not. At one point I have to back up and go at the sharp curve twice. But the destination makes it worthwhile, a manor perched on a hill with a plummeting view of town.

Mull itself is a postcard, rainbow shops and homes hugging a cozy harbour. There's a view of the bay from our room. Wind blows, rocking buoy-moored sailboats like erratic metronomes. Around the harbour leafy deciduous provide a tight podocarp wrap. Windows are left ajar. Ring-necked pigeons coo, a sound I associate with European travel. We saunter down the hill to a welcoming pub with a long row of taps, hearty soup, fried fish, good staff and a warm wood-fire near a dart board – the kind of place Andy Capp would live out his days.

We're here because it's pretty and somewhat on the way, as well as offering a chance to see Iona Abbey, Saint Columba's Holy Isle. Having viewed *The Book of Kells* (*The Book of Columba*) at Trinity University in Dublin, we think this provides a satisfying link in our rambling journey. And it's where some of the earliest Viking raids occurred. Just another fifty-mile, death-defying drive down single-lane track to the end of the land, a choppy boat ride, and you're there. "Do not attempt to do this in a day," a guide book warns. But isn't every travel-writer unemployed, without schedules? Granted, our experience getting here left me none too keen to revisit these suicidal roads, but this excursion appeals. So I rationalize it away – at least I don't need to remember which side to drive on, what with the road only being the width of one car. Maybe we won't be taking it easy on Mull after all.

I'll spare you most of the driving details: anxiety, the occasional pullout and backing up, the holding of breath while campers pass, driven by other foreigners more terrified than you, the sound of tires sliding from asphalt to gravel and soft mud and back again. All the time playing odds like a degenerate gambler, trusting you'll beat the house. Hoping oncoming cars at blind bends can stop and the rental car has airbags. Believing the slower we go, the longer we're in this death race, so just tear the Band-Aid and drive as fast as possible. Of course, big picture, the relative danger we're in is manageable. We're not being bombed or drinking contaminated water and the likelihood of being gunned-down here is slim. So I appreciate the context. However. Once was enough.

Yes, I want to see Iona but the main reason we've tackled this drive across Mull is to get on a boat for a puffin tour. We visited with a couple over breakfast at the inn who made it clear it's a remarkable excursion. If you want to experience puffins, this is the thing to do. So now we're in Fionnphort, boarding a boat on a bay the colour of peridot. It looks Caribbean – brilliant sun, sand and sea but the day's windy and cold – green-blue waves frothing into whitecaps as two dozen of us huddle aboard a chunky boat, getting as comfy as we can for a two-hour journey to Lunga Island.

Our captain's name is Pal. He helped me on the phone. "Thanks Pal," I'd said, which is truly fun saying to someone you've just met. This reminded me of *Uncle Buck* – the sleazy little character at the bowling alley. "Just

call me Pal," he says. "Everybody does." To which John Candy barks, "Take a hike, Pal!" Fortunately our skipper is the opposite of that Pal. And he's now at the helm – our new pal Pal – firing the diesel engine, which kicks to life with a belch of black fumes. A barking report follows like a one gun salute. And with that our little group lumbers into choppy teal sea.

IONA, LUNGA AND STAFFA

It's 563 and Columba has just arrived from Ireland. "Behold Iona!" he exclaims from his flimsy boat. "A blessing on each eye that see-eth it." Now maybe any terra firma looks divine after sailing the Atlantic from Ireland. Regardless, the Holy Island of Iona is indeed peaceful and pretty, a canoe-shaped lump of land just across the water from Mull's Fionnphort. Twentieth-century community founder George MacLeod describes it as "a thin place poised between heaven and earth."

The abbey rests on a gentle rise, a trophy on a mantle. By the time he finished building this place he was Saint Columba, bringing the word of God in the footsteps of Saint Patrick. Columba may not have been quite the adventurer Saint Brendan was – crossing Arctic waters like a Viking – but he was a traveller all the same. Power followed him, a political missionary who wouldn't shy from a fight. As with Erik the Red's banishment, Columba arrived with his own baggage, mystery and allegations of murder. But along with that he brought Christianity to Britain – a tremor preceding a tide-turning wave. In the tale of the Irish saving civilization, Columba gets top-billing.

I'll let Peter Stanford set the scene with a timeless description from his book *The Extra Mile*, in which he writes, "Iona bobs serene and alone on the near horizon, its elemental landscape of tough-looking, stumpy, stoney hills sliding down to bleached white sands apparently little changed since the Ice Age receded 20,000 years ago." (Thank you Peter, that'll be all.) Even David McFadden the poet waxes, well, the way his people do, describing Scotland as it compares to Iona – a benchmark for simple beauty. In *An Innocent in Scotland*, McFadden writes of highland grass being "Iona-like – rich green and dotted with wildflowers."

With Iona on the west edge of Scotland and Lindisfarne on England's eastern shore, these Viking-raided Holy Islands tidily frame the UK leg of

our saga (along with our Woolf bookends). While the 793 sacking of Lindisfarne began the Viking Age, Iona was stormed more frequently. The first Viking attack occurred here just two years after Lindisfarne. A manuscript from Glasgow's Kelvingrove Museum states, "Iona was burned by the heathens in 802," this being the second attack, with a third occurring in 806 which emptied the abbey. Remarkably the Lindisfarne Gospels survived the 793 raid, but by the time Iona was pillaged, Vikings realized the value of church manuscripts and left nothing behind. Today, Iona's a place of buried kings, worship and pilgrimage. The last raid that cleaned this place out in 806 left sixty-eight dead, the slaughter occurring on the shore we're currently chugging past – Martyr's Bay – now home to the unappealingly named Martyr's Bay Restaurant.

Our boat bumps through the bight in swirling wind before heading out to sea. Water deepens, fathoms and poetic hues – cobalt, sapphire, cerulean – under clusters of soaring seabirds: razorbills, guillemots, fulmars and cormorants. And after two bouncing hours in misty sea spray we spy our destination, Lunga Island, reminiscent of R. S. Thomas' *Pilgrimages*.

There is an island there is no going
to but in a small boat the way
the saints went, travelling the gallery
of the frightened faces of
the long-drowned, munching the gravel
of its beaches.

Pal drops us as at a gangway linked to a pontoon tethered to the leeward shore, where we're left to munch beach gravel on our own. Lunga's a windblown outcrop of grass-covered rock, steep and eroded, dotted with cliffs and shallow caves. We scramble to the rocky shore and follow a thin, worn footpath. A white arrow's spray-painted on a cliff face, wordlessly indicating *This Way*. And we climb: some cautious footing, natural handholds and high steps, forced into shape from heavy-toed boots and erosion. Aside from dirt, the faint path's dry mud with patches of bunchgrass and gneiss. Following a moderate climb we crest a plateau onto a little plain of wildflower, mossy grass … and puffins!

Puffins *like* people, we're told. It keeps predators away. Their comfort around us is palpable. We approach slowly, more out of wonder than

anything – connection with nature. And we sit and watch, surrounded by thousands of inquisitive puffins going about their day: eating, nesting, socializing, flying and burrowing.

Time drifts and we lose ourselves in the bustling avian community, but after a stretch we drag ourselves away to explore the island. There's the foundation of a home – it could be fifty or five hundred years old. A pair of old leather boots sits nearby on a low stone fence, a mystery in the middle of nowhere.

We circle back to the puffin colony and again slip into reverie in the midst of black and white feathers and rainbow beaks, captivated by intelligent, triangle eyes. We saunter among the birds and burrow-nests to a cliff where they leap into flight like little cliff-divers. As I stand on the edge of the land, water below, more cliff beyond, a cluster of birds swarms past me, a wave of puffins washing over me – the sensation of real-life 4D IMAX, one of the most remarkable things I've experienced. I've only ever felt this in water, immersed in schools of fish, a sense of infinity.

From its deeper water anchorage, our boat's now burbling back toward the wobbly gangway pontoon to retrieve us. We peel ourselves from the puffin colony and scramble back down the embankments to shore.

From Lunga we motor to the Ullin of Staffa, another remote island of windy grass and flowering clover. Like Staffin on Skye, this too was named by Vikings, another "Place of Pillars." What greets us is a field of bluebells, the throaty caw of ravens, and chirping meadow pipits. The source of this little island's name is Fingal's Cave – a chamber of towering hexagonal stone pillars fronting the sea. It looks carved, like manmade columns in dark, tight-fitting rock. It's in fact a continuation of Ireland's Giant's Causeway – nature acting as geometric sculptor – and is acoustically perfect, an organic concert hall in the middle of the ocean with no point of access.

I was so consumed with the drive, knowing where to meet Pal, getting to Iona – a holy Land's End within my saga, not to mention the puffins – I had no idea we were coming to Staffa. I'd seen it on TV, worth a day of travel in its own right. And here we are, plonked on this stone cathedral in the sea. Serendipitous would be an understatement. It's not, of course. This was part of the excursion. I just didn't know it.

The fifty-mile drive back at day's end feels oddly familiar. Almost easy. There's little traffic, and setting sun just begins to get blinding as we approach Tobermory, now glowing a welcoming shade of honey. Remarkably, in just twenty-four hours this has become home – the wonder of travel. We leave the car and go back to the pub for chowder, fish and chips, local tap beer, a crackling fire, and once more settle in, a short scenic stroll from our latest home-away-from-home.

MULL TO EDINBURGH

Driving to the ferry we spot a sea eagle – rare and monstrous, hunting shoreline that mirrors this sparse stretch of road. Today's sky is silky gray flecked with blue. Offshore, a skeletal shipwreck lays wedged in the fjord-like bay, the scene lonely and remote. From Craignure the ferry *Eileen Mullaich* – named for the island of Mull – carries us to the mainland, to Oban, renowned for peaty malt whisky and seafood. Standing at a railing it's surprisingly quiet. There's a gentle rocking, like a cradle, making me drowsy. In the oddly mute space I decide this must be the sound of silence.

We stop in Oban for shopping and fish and chips. I look for a small bottle of Oban whisky but they only make large. (No, I didn't get the big bottle.) I've sampled local whisky on each island we've visited – Arran, Skye, Mull, with my favourite being Orkney's Highland Park. Which I drank with Orkney Brewery's Skull Splitter Ale, strong dark beer named after Torfinn "Skull Splitter" Hausakljuv, tenth-century Earl of Orkney.

From Oban we spend an afternoon driving – widening roads and thickening traffic – as we cross the country west to east. Gone are country tracks and stone fences. Now it's all onramps, off-ramps, fast food and gas stations as the odometer spins. We pass Stirling – Neil Oliver's home – and I give him a nod. Thanks for the research, Neil. Thanks for the heavy lifting.

Stirling Castle sits high and proud, as though hewn from the very rock it rests on. We were there a few years ago, watching a falconry display – a somewhat frightening exhibit, dancing an animal line between trained and wild. I think of the eyepatch worn by Kirk Douglas – Einar, his eyeball plucked by a vice-like talon – and shudder.

We proceed through a series of busy roundabouts – singles and doubles, and finish our drive at Edinburgh airport where we drop the car and train to the city. Last time we were here our room faced the castle. I curled up in a round windowsill – two feet wide – and felt like a hobbit, gazing at the citadel. Now, we're walking under its gaze, the same crown-like setting as Stirling, a dark peak of rock, difficult to determine where stone and castle meet – a smooth rising fortification. Here in the capital we're back in the lowlands, a brooding town of sooty Georgian sandstone. Well-treed, well-rocked, and well-historied. Clichés aside, it's decidedly different from Glasgow. Despite their city's harsh edges, Glaswegians are effusive in their warmth. Determined, perhaps, to differentiate from Edinburgh's insular aloofness. Ian Rankin refers to life here as "living in a city the size of a town, a town with a village mentality."

But for a traveller, Edinburgh's small size – walkability – is a boon. Old Town to New is a tidy span of crescents and leafy trees with chirping birds. Wrought-iron gates front attractive mews with wide stone steps. Weather feels perpetually overcast – bright flat light that makes you squint – too dark for sunglasses, too bright *not* to wear sunglasses. It's the nation's literary hub as well: Scott, Stevenson, Doyle, Burns, Spark and Rowling. "This is, after all," Rankin writes, "a city of words." Walking tours of authors and stories, characters real and imagined, follow alleys and laneways. I get lost in a two-storey bookstore, figuratively and literally, weaving through high shelves and stacks – literature, poetry, travel and gritty local fiction – drugs, murder and suicide. There's a poster of John Taylor promoting his recent autobiography – the life of a British rock-and-roller. *This* is the John Taylor I remember, not the one with the snot from the Coast Path. And I'm relieved to know old rockers *can* age well.

LINDISFARNE

"In this year terrible portents appeared over Northumbria, and miserably frightened the inhabitants: there were exceptional flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air. A great famine soon followed these signs; and a little after that in the same year the harrying of the heathen miserably destroyed God's church in Lindisfarne by rapine and slaughter."

This, from the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle*, refers to England's first documented Viking raid, in 793 at Lindisfarne. And today that's where we go; to Northumbria, where it all began. Researchers have since found evidence indicating an even earlier Danish raid on the southwest coast in 789, but for most historians, England's Viking Age began at Lindisfarne.

We're making our way to a bus in downtown Edinburgh. It's a bright walk along Princes Street, morning sun reflected on polished paving-stone, gleaming light above and below. I peer into Calton cemetery, where I visited a few years ago. More headstones have fallen, its age accelerating. Our little bus arrives and passengers are shockingly old – the cemetery lively by comparison. And here we are, going back in time to the start of the Viking Age while our companions offer a frightening glimpse of the future.

Paul's our driver, a proud, vocal Scotsman. He rattles off classic Sean Connery lines, doing the voice, then laments local history as though the Battle at Bannockburn just happened. You'd think he was there, in 1314, telling Robert the Bruce what to do. As he drives us south into Northumberland, crossing an invisible border into Geordie-land, he asks, "Can you smell it?" Then makes us wait, a theatrical pause, before answering his own question with distaste, "… English."

Driving alongside bluebells and purple rhododendron, we stop to admire Bass Rock bird sanctuary, an offshore mountain of volcanic rock swirling with seabirds. We carry on past pastures, hedges, stone walls and clumps of trees. The road bisects hills and valleys, some tight, some broad. Paul tells us they're all the same, called glens in Scotland and dales in England. I believe they're different. Mind you, so is Paul.

Travelling here I feel I'm closing a thick red circle on the map, a timeline looping back on itself. This part of our journey winds down where Viking history began – the first known Norse raid in England. Whether it was or not no longer matters. It's the first one we know of for certain, here in the northeast corner of England at Lindisfarne, another Holy Island.

Our bus winds toward the isle on a long tidal causeway across powerful narrows. As we drive, pilgrims slosh through low tide – walking in sea beside the road – two miles to the priory. Their window of safety is small. Gulls hang in flight, motionless, and wild poppies dot the causeway in

bloody splashes. Theroux describes arriving here: “On Holy Island I felt a sense of being on board a ship that was moored on a long hawser, occasionally drifting to sea and occasionally bumping the shore.”

Across the causeway we park and our group scatters like escaping convicts, dispersing over grassy dunes and windswept fields. A metaled footpath follows a low fence. And there it is, unveiled. A medieval fort on a chunk of rock, a blurred line of land and parapet, the whole sitting offshore like a chess piece. Castle. It could be Stirling or Edinburgh. But all around is different – sea in the air. Literally. I’m breathing spindrift, each lungful a mix of saline and mist. Lindisfarne Castle lies in front of us, Lindisfarne Priory behind. To left and right – open sea. Visually, I’m washed away. Longships with dragon-head prows emerge from mental fog, the rhythm and sound of heaving oar and flame that began this odyssey. This, they do *not* do on the Rideau. Here it was clinker-built wood, the clatter of arms and adrenaline musk of battle – life, death and a smile from Thor.

This is Viking Age ground zero. Being here I feel I’ve completed something – an intangible that’s anything but. Gazing at the castle from a distance I stay put, not wanting to explore it any further. Sometimes you don’t need to dance. Admire from afar. You can’t be disappointed.

I turn and walk to the priory, a small, quiet cemetery surrounded in crumbled brick. Partial walls remain, defiant, the brickwork ochre-red, a blush under overcast sky. I peer through a wrought-iron gate. It opens, but again, I’ll look from here, content. Another sanctuary. All around’s busy with tourist gawkers and pilgrims, but here is silent and peaceful. Perhaps what the pious seek. Or avoid.

We stroll around the compact village centre, my breath like sighs – the denouement of conclusion. Northumberland flags wave. I taste Lindisfarne brown ale – medieval monks’ brew, from the mystical yeast they called God-is-Good, and Abbey mead, brewed from grain and honey – a Viking staple.

"When I say, ‘Be back here, I mean it,’” Paul had said in a serious tone. “We leave ahead of the tide. No room for error. If you’re not back, you’re on your own.” He emphasized this by pointing to a photo of a submerged vehicle – a car challenging the tide, defying lessons from Canute. So now we’re back in the bus, navigating the causeway ahead of the tide.

We continue south into Northumbrian England to Alnwick – Aln being Celtic for bright river, wick an Anglo-Saxon settlement – pronounced "Ann-ick." We're going to Alnwick Castle, used in filming *Harry Potter* and *Downton Abbey* – pronounced "Downtown Abbey" if you want an easy laugh from me. Beyond the castle lies another ancient market community, a town both quaint and gritty. There's an arched gateway from its days as a walled city and a statue of someone named Percy – the family who ran the place for seven hundred years, and some feel still do.

In town is a bookstore in the former train station – a couple-run business (wife and husband) that strikes me as brilliant. She's a bibliophile. He's a train buff, or ferroequinologist, which I now know from being in a bookstore run by a train buff. The store's charming, eclectic and well-stocked. We lunch in their adjacent restaurant – creamy mushrooms on buttery toast – while a model train snakes through rafters, tooting a little steam whistle.

Outside we stroll the castle grounds where a private party's taking place – well-dressed, rigid people mingling awkwardly. Oh, to be a boor in a setting like that! Where's Rodney Dangerfield when we need him?

We buy a bag of candy and settle into the bus for a long drive back to Scotland across the River Tweed. We pass East Lothian – birthplace of the Scottish flag – and I'm struck with pride for my dad's local lineage. Driving into Edinburgh, black clouds swirl, yawning around an oval of blue sky fanned in sundogs. It could be an amphitheater. We pass the foot of Arthur's Seat – the angled peak centring Edinburgh – then Calton Hill, its observatory perched on a bluff. Finally, the bus stops for good. Concrete underfoot never felt so good.

I finish the evening with Belhaven Stout while the bells of Saint Mary's chorus. Tonight is bell-ringing practice night – joyous and celebratory. I open windows in spite of the cold, filling our unit with sound, and wonder if somewhere in Bosham harbour a sunken tenor chimes.

EDINBURGH

Following Lindisfarne's glimpse onto the start of the Viking Age, Edinburgh offers a resonating milestone to close our current UK loop. Tony Hawks, author of *Round Ireland with a Fridge*, describes this

satisfying (albeit interim) conclusion as “the pleasing circular shape it brought to my journey.” For here, in the National Museum of Scotland, are the Lewis Chessmen. A few of them. Generously loaned back to the rightful owners by the British Museum.

Made in Norway between 1150 and 1200, the Chessmen are intricately carved walrus ivory and whale teeth, elaborately worked into kings and queens, bishops, mounted knights, warders and obelisk-shaped pawns. Pieces have facial expressions. There’s nobility, stature, in their tiny presence. The “pleasing circular shape” this brings to my journey is the fact that these chessmen were crafted at the *end* of the Viking Age. Four centuries after Lindisfarne – from a bloody smash-and-grab on the sandy shores of Holy Island to the highest level of artisanal creativity – the sophisticated, royal game from Persia and the Orient. These small carved statues speak to a time and place of affluence. Chess – symbolic of leisure and intellect. A path evidenced in all dynasties – progress from subsistence to power. And from warring factions to organized government. Once necessities are met, humans long for more – the vacuum filled by creativity and play.

That’s what I saw when I first gazed at these figures in ivory, lit from above under glass. It was a few years ago and we had Scotland’s National Museum virtually to ourselves – a private function on a weekday evening. I was eating an absurd amount of canapes – Scottish smoked salmon on buttered brown bread. I may have singlehandedly depleted national fish stocks. People mingled around the cavernous space, standing at exhibits for suitable lengths of time before moving on. But I was cemented in front of the Chessmen.

They were unearthed on the Isle of Lewis – where Harris Tweed comes from. This was when Scotland’s Western Isles were part of Norway. The chessmen were buried near Uig, Lewis. Not to be confused with the Uig we went to on Skye. (Yes, there’s more than one Uig.) It’s believed the set was being transported by a merchant travelling to Ireland, to the four-hundred-year-old Viking market town of Dublin.

Eventually the museum party broke up and we left. We were keen for our own space – the streets, loose clusters of strangers more peaceful and intimate than people you know in number. Outside, the smell of venting brewery hung in low dark air. “Edinburgh through the night …” writes

Rankin, “the occasional taxi rippling across setts and lonely shadowy figures slouching home with hands in pockets, shoulders hunched.” We did the same, walking with the hunched-shoulder crowd, me with a fridge magnet of the Chessmen I like but don’t need. Their faces remain in my mind.

Consistent with powerful nation-states, the Viking Golden Age gradually waned, a dulling of the gilt. Dynasties end – three hundred years is common, applicable to a surprising number of empires. There’s plenty of proof to support this – empirical evidence, you could say. America’s clock is ticking. But history’s not chess, tidy in its finality. On life’s game board squares bleed and blur with each move. And do legacies really end? Or does rule simply move elsewhere? Like moss or lichen, organisms perennially finding new hosts and means of survival – resilience defying time. This is how I view Vikings. Despite changing rule and blended bloodlines, Vikings remain in Scandinavian place names around the world and words we associate with trade – give and take, and emotion – angry and happy. Expressions created, defined, by Norsemen. Theroux cites language northwest of here, “the Gaelic distinctly Scandinavian, a soft Norse whirr in every syllable – a legacy of the Vikings, the local dialect – Norn.” Whether a people, language or an Age, Vikings remain – like my trail, a curving road to a point undefined.

DUNFERMLINE

Today our schedule’s finally open. It’d be easy to stay in our unit. It’s splashy and oversized, the kind of place that gets booked when you’re tired of planning, budgets and compromise. There’s a shelf of Ian Rankin, an inviting row of Inspector Rebus – quintessential Edinburgh. I ignore my current books and read Rankin instead.

Like Dublin, this is a literary city, a place for book lovers. And ferroequinologists, as we now know. I look forward to telling dad about this place – the shelf of Rankin – one of his favourite authors. Before we set out on this viking foray dad asked if I’d be going to Dunfermline, where his dad was born, a man he met but never knew. I said it wasn’t on the roster. Not this time.

But I realize I don’t actually know where Dunfermline is. So I look it up and find it’s only a half-hour train ride from Edinburgh. A sign? Maybe.

So I grab a Rankin short story compilation and go, arriving at the station with no time to spare, literally jumping aboard the train, a breezy flow of timing as though orchestrated. And I head to Dunfermline, to dad's dad's hometown.

The journey starts uninterestingly: industrial land, tracks and blocks of three-storey tenement apartments in white stucco and gypsum. High hedges hide things for a while. The train shoots through graffitied tunnels and more light industry, a carpark, and then emerges into lush green fields with pockets of beech – tall, healthy and old. We pass tidy yards and quaint gardens in Dalmeny. Bilingual signs appear – English and Gaelic. On through Queensferry. Heavier industry takes shape and the train approaches the Firth of Forth with its enormous bridge – Scottish engineering at its best. I feel I'm closing in on some sort of goal. What that is, I'm not sure, but it feels good. Bigger than me. Rankin and Rebus are fine company but their home's been left behind. Ahead lies a facet of mine. Something I'm doing for my dad. Special to him I now realize, which makes it special to me.

The train crosses the river – steep banks with crescents of gold sand and shingle far below. And a little further on I arrive at Dunfermline town. I leave the station and explore. Gently bending streets and stone houses with slate roofs seem to be the norm. Wood chimneys puff contentedly. A sturdy little church anchors town centre on a wedge of green. I stroll to a park, home to chunky gray pigeons and bright white blossoms. A pretty place. Carnegie's from here, born in Dunfermline. Andrew, not Dale. And more importantly, a man my dad called father. I'm surprised how good this feels. I take some photos to show dad – a little slice of town, the church, the park, happy I can tell him about getting here, as well as appreciating his love of Inspector Rebus. And with that I return to the train and Rankin with a smile, mentally having a share with my dad.

A short while later, in our high-ceilinged room, lost in a huge leather sectional, my phone rings. I think I know why, even though there's no reason to suspect this. When I see it's my sister calling, I just know. I make a sound, I believe, of resignation. And sadness. I answer the phone and let her talk and cry and tell me dad's no longer with us. Not in body.

I think of the last visit he and I had, shortly before we were set to leave. A good one. With laughter and hugs. And I remember a phone

conversation just after that, a call he made to say the things everyone longs to hear from their dad. A beautiful call from a beautiful man. Our last conversation, another call, was another fun one. Love veiled in humour – an annual joke we swapped and enjoyed for years. More laughter, gratitude – happy and fortunate. His legacy.

Back home in Vancouver, following a flight I wouldn't remember, I'm wall-gazing. Literally. Staring at a framed giclée, surrounded in soft earthen tones reminiscent of sphagnum. A canoe sits anchored on the water. It faces us, the angle masking size, but you know it's big, designed to carry fishermen, hunters, warriors in number. Built of yellow cedar, nothing else it could be – a soft hybrid of amber and gold. Paint at the waterline's black and red, suggestion of origin – a turning globe like Google Earth, focusing as we descend … North America … British Columbia. Beyond the canoe is overcast horizon, sea and sky a gentle wash of green-blue-gray. You can feel the chill and damp. And through the mist, a raven – provenance. First Nations. But the red and black near the water. This is Haida. A vessel for diplomats and raiders, swathed in crimson. Drab bugs are harmless, the vibrant deadly. This ship's a warning. The raven blurs place and time – different people, but Vikings all the same.

This canoe has a name – *Loo Taas*, Wave Eater. I can find this boat. Framed on a wall in our small home, it's both discrete and prominent. Every day I'm there, same as the world map. But now I'll go in body. Like the raven. And as much as the draw to the Haida canoe, I'm pulled to just go away. I want to find that boat but I need to grieve and to heal, process dad's passing – feelings still consuming and raw. I want a beach – a big one, isolated and lonesome – pulse of surf, connection with nothing. And everything. I want to go to the edge of the world and see what I can see.

Pacific

Ambition leads me not only farther than any other man has gone before me, but as far I think it possible for man to go.

—Captain James Cook

HAIDA GWAII

A small plane from a remote terminal hauls me north to Haida Gwaii – prehistoric land, old growth rainforest and Haida First Nations. Fitting to my viking trail. We finished our Norse Britain excursion in the Hebrides like Fenton Hardy, going from Edinburgh to Lindisfarne and dad's dad's hometown. Like research, my travel's now following hunches and side-streets, a voyage as pointedly vague as that of every explorer.

I exit the little plane, a ragtag collection of locals and wanderers gathering packs and duffels. I'm driven to my rental car and a bald eagle circles, low, directly overhead. ("When you see an eagle you know this is a special place.") And I decide I don't want to find my accommodation just yet. There's too much to see.

From Masset I drive south to Port Clements, home of The Golden Spruce. The Spruce is an anomaly, a genetic oddity that makes albinos seem common – a three-hundred-year-old spruce with needles entirely gold in colour. It's in a remote forest on Haida Gwaii's Graham Island. If you've read *The Golden Spruce*, you know the story. It was cut down by a protester for reasons too complex, convoluted, to comprehend. Killing makes sense to killers. It was felled with precision, into the Yakoun River.

From the car I walk a footpath through towering evergreens – sentient sentinels. And I see The Spruce, now on its side, spindly and bare, the colour of bones. It lays like a corpse on the river. This was a sacred tree. To everyone. Even the man who brought it down.

With a blessing and altruism, a piece of the trunk, still living, was cut by a Native, with Elders and Chiefs presiding. And this modest slab of spruce, this part of the land, was passed to a luthier, a gifted Canadian

artisan who fashioned the wood into a guitar, an instrument known as *Voyageur*. The *Voyageur* guitar crossed the country, the ambitious project of CBC's Jowi ("Joey") Taylor. It encapsulates Canada – a guitar of and for the people. *Six String Nation* is its story. Imagine a small piece of furniture constructed of generations of heirlooms from every family. Now imagine you pass that around and play it, sing to it – add your stamp to the whole. It's one of the most special things I've been witness to. When Jowi passed *Voyageur* to me to play on a little stage in a theatre-style hall on Vancouver Island, I felt pride and privilege beyond measure. One of those things bigger than any or all of us.

In the forest, I take a picture of the Spruce. A glow appears in the photo I don't see in person and I think of pictures capturing souls. Retracing my steps, I leave the forest and notice a small sign I hadn't previously seen. "Do not look back," it reads. "There is much more to see, feel and love." Leave everything behind. Your life lies ahead. I read this again, slowly. "Do not look back." And I feel lighter, unseen burdens dissolving. A feeling, ironically, I long to hold on to.

I drive a short distance on active logging road, peering around bends for the telltale dust of big rigs, then go from gravel to winding asphalt with a centre-line – the Yellowhead Highway that leaps from B.C.'s mainland to these remote islands. CBC radio – the one channel – fades in and out as I drive. I catch snippets of Stuart McLean and the soothing country soul of Birds of Chicago. In Port Clements I stop at Millennium Park and the Golden Spruce Trail at Saint Mark's church. The Golden Spruce offspring lives here. A sapling, seeded from the original, grows in a small fenced enclosure. It's a squat, scrawny thing, heavy with optimism. A feather's fallen near it, dropped from a large bird – black with downy white – a magic vignette.

Driving down the island I stop at Balance Rock – a gravity-defying hunk of basalt shaped like a monstrous rugby ball on its side – sitting improbably on a small and natural Precambrian plinth. It looks as though it could be rocked like a cradle or pushed over. But it's sat this way for longer than anyone knows. I hike through bushes and graze on wild strawberries and huckleberries. Blacktail deer cross the road, indifferent to the occasional vehicle, and ravens fly by with a whooshing of wings.

I carry on south through Tlell and Skidegate to Queen Charlotte City for supplies. From Skidegate, the *MV Kwuna* ferries me to Alliford Bay, Moresby Island. From here I drive to the hamlet of Sandspit with two new passengers – hitchhikers from the ferry. Dropping a bag in a hostel-like room I go to the pub, where everyone eats halibut and chips and drinks Lucky lager. Back in my room with window open I drift off to the warbling chirp of bald eagles, soft patter of rain and the aroma of sea.

I wake eleven hours later. Breakfast smells waft in my room – bacon and strong coffee. I stumble down to where Gina, a friendly young Quebecoise hippy-in-waiting proffers warm and generous portions of potatoes, eggs and staphylococcus. Remarkably, she manages to sneeze in a hundred-and-eighty degree arc. The result, a feeling of eating al fresco in a squall – misting with a soupçon of mucous. I towel off, eat, and jump in a van with two others, going south to Moresby Camp at the head of a fjord-like inlet where a Zodiac rhib motors our little group to open water.

We're in Hecate Strait, known for fishing – salmon and halibut, and treacherous sea – a place of shipwrecks. North is the Dixon Entrance, deep ocean binding Alaska and Canada to the North Pacific. This was a place of explorers – La Pérouse, Perez, Cook and Drake – France, Spain and Britain seeking the Northwest Passage, a window to the Orient. All came, courageous, determined, and failed, forced to sail back around the world. Historian Daniel Boorstin coined the term "negative discovery" – uncovering what's *not* there. The Passage simply didn't exist. Not yet.

Veering away from land we find Steller sea lions barking and flopping on rocks. The bull, a massive bellowing creature, weighs roughly a ton. (I look this up; it would be impolite to ask, plus it looks busy with its smelly harem.) We head shoreward, following the coast, passing petrels in flight, auklets and murrelets on the water. Deer graze near the beach in thickets of alder and hemlock. Eagles perch in trees where a massive, multi-generational aerie sits in the highest branches of a seaside spruce. The shoreline's textbook Pacific Northwest – red cedar, lilting hemlock, spindly alder, stodgy spruce, rock and sand shoreline, outsized bivalves, bull kelp, driftwood, jetsam from timber barges and industry with the occasional treasure from Japan – fish floats of coloured glass and bulbs from ships and lighthouses, fragments worn smooth by surf and time.

In autobiographical *Klee Wyck*, Emily Carr writes of her arrival to this shore, “Skedans Beach was wide. Sea-drift was scattered over it. Behind the logs the ground sloped up a little to the old village site. It was smothered now under a green tangle, just one grey roof still squatted there among the bushes, and a battered row of totem poles circled the bay.” Now our boat slows as we enter the same bay, here at Louise Island. South of us is Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve. Our destination’s the same as Carr’s, the ancient Haida village of Skedans – K’uuna Llnagaay. What greets us on our approach is haunting – century-old bleached totems nodding to the water, silence and palpable spirits.

Two Watchmen greet us, tasked with protecting this site – ancestors and culture. Beaching the rhib we unload onto pea-gravel shore. Our small group is hushed, the awe of entering a cathedral. I know this place from Carr’s art. She was here eighty years ago, painting this environment. I recognize a cliff face, young alders now grown – a sense of returning to a place I’ve never been. We crunch across the rocky beach to a grassy rise where the leaning totems guard the bay like wraiths, memories entwined with the land.

The Watchmen are two Haida, a brilliant young woman – the first female Watchman – and an older, serious man wearing a flat-top flared hat of woven cedar. I’ve seen these hats in galleries with four-figure price tags, the workmanship millennia of expertise – practical, wearable art. We’re led to their cabin, where we share lunch outside, seated on logs. After, we follow a trail loosely bordered with huge clam and oyster shells, like a velvet rope around an exhibit. And we walk and gawk and soak up the space, privileged to witness it all. History here is long, proud and tragic. What physically remains are longhouse foundations, corner posts and carved totems – house and frontal poles, mortuary and memorial poles – now falling or fallen, melting back to the land.

From the remains of Skedans we march through forest – a towering canopy of cedar over thick mossy ground the colour of young clover and a blanket of salal. A woodpecker feather lies near the path, an orangey-red quill, and one of the other tourist-guests, a local naturalist, shows me licorice root, which we pluck from where it grows, high up the trunk of a four-hundred-year-old spruce. The tallest person in the group stretches to

reach it, and it comes away like a tiny white radish, the taste of black licorice and dirt.

We endure a long and jarring ride back in the boat, then wait in the rain while our trailer's replaced. And then our vehicle. Snacks and outerwear get shared. Eventually we manage a bumpy van-ride back to Sandspit where I fall into bed for another long sleep, curious as to when the nasal squawk of ravens became so soothing.

When I finally wake I enjoy another tasty breakfast made with great love and little hygiene. Then I travel north from Moresby to Graham Island, from Sandspit back to Skidegate. I visit with people in line for the ferry – walk-ons from northern B.C. – and before long we realize we know the same people, then laugh and gossip, twenty-five years of shared stories amongst people who've just met.

When I drive off the ferry it's still early, so I stop for coffee and watch eagles. I'm here to visit Kaay Llnagaay – the Haida Heritage Centre. It won't open for a while so I leave my tiny dun-yellow Kia Rio – the preferred transport of adventurer-travellers everywhere – and saunter the grounds. There's a soft sound of metal on wood, shaving and chipping. Three men are already at work in the carving shed, adding life to a massive log on its side, their skill an artisanal blend of practice and vision. I move slowly and still feel hurried. Things move in tempo with the land, unchanged for a dozen millennia. I stand and watch.

Time passes.

One of the men looks up. Smiles. Then returns to working the fragrant wood with a chisel, pushing the tool by hand. Shavings of wood curl and fall to the ground. I ask him about the tree.

"Red cedar," he replies. Some more time passes. "Where you come from?" he asks, still shaping the tree. A lovely ethereal question – open parentheses, and I think of possible answers.

"Today, from Sandspit," I say. "Before that, Vancouver."

He nods, then after a while asks, "And where you heading?"

My response time slows, finding local time, and I say, "Making my way north. Onto Masset."

He pauses. Looks up again, eyes smiling.

“Then North Beach,” I say.

The smile spreads over his face. “Edge of the world,” he says, which feels like a blessing.

“Yes,” I smile back. “Edge of the world.”

I leave the man to his work – his art, and from the shed I walk through stout totems facing the water, a regal welcoming party – literal family trees. And there on the sand sits the canoe. The boat that brought me here, through a painting. A replica. The one from my wall’s elsewhere, being cared for. I decide this is just as good. A double changes nothing in a film, just protects the star. I’ll take this. Another touchstone – something real from something imagined.

The Heritage Centre’s a diverse collection of exhibits – an interactive museum – engaging, entertaining and informative. I learn about trees, food, clothing and art. And I learn more of Haida – The People. In the last Ice Age, when the North American ice cap inched forward, it forced the northern edge of the continent downward, like a weight placed on one side of a floating raft. The resulting shift pushed Haida Gwaii – on the outer edge of the continent’s land mass – up, where it remained above the ice blanketing North America. Which resulted in this archipelago being a vibrant, living place when most everything else sat dormant, buried deep in ice. In part because of this, The People have lived here for thirteen thousand consecutive years. Three times longer than Biblical Earth.

Haida Nation clans are grouped into two moieties – Eagles and Ravens, familiar lineage carvings atop totem poles. I think of the raven with the boat in the painting that brought me here. And I think of the ones released by Raven-Floki, to guide him to places he didn’t yet know, new land to call home.

I’ve seen as much as I hoped and now want to spend time doing nothing. I leave the Heritage Centre and drive north to the end of the road, to a dune on the beach – a shoring line of salal, marram and stout, windblown evergreens. Beyond lies an endless sweep of sand – ocean beach that stretches forever. And nothing else. Mick Jagger’s *Hideaway* plays in my head: “Out of everybody’s reach / Out on some twisted beach / I’m gonna hide away.”

My new home is a tiny spherical camper on a dune, nestled in trees with a water view – a 1974 Boler trailer beneath a wood canopy like the frame of a barn, which creates a kind of open-air living room. There's a small table, two chairs and a rusty little chandelier hanging from a crossbeam. Plunk this in the Caribbean or Tahiti, it would be a few thousand dollars a night. Here, I pass over a few twenties and it's mine. Edge of the world. I could stay here a very long time.

Sun sets in bands of gold-blue on copper, a fiery peach mirrored in the water. My seat's a log, a round bench, cool to the touch. I make a fire of skeletal driftwood. Dinner's beef jerky, landjäger, sardines – a meal of protein and sodium. Red wine in a plastic cup. It's late, the long days of summer north of the fifty-fourth parallel. When the fire finally dies I crawl into the Boler to sleep between quilts of duck down, lulled by the sound of waves caressing sand – the sound medicinal, healing. I decide my time here's part hiding, part healing. Like the salted meat, a kind of curing.

A rejuvenating sunrise. My gentle alarm's the pulse of breakers on beach. A watery skyline hints at elsewhere, land beyond the horizon. The shore's decorated in huge ribbons of kelp, the occasional jelly, and a starfish the red-orange of traffic-cones. I'd spoken with a likable man named Greg who recalled being here as a child. "Everything's bigger," he said. "Birds, trees, things on the beach – everything's huge." Now I know what he meant.

There's a tree on the sand, long dead, bleached from sun, wind and sea, half hollowed – a natural canoe. A single root, thick and twisted, curves up and out, the neck of a swan, or a dragon-boat prow, a longship like those from Lindisfarne. This could be that shore. The same expanse of isolated, sea-washed sand. Vivid and forgotten, a timeline testing memory. The occasional eagle sound and wing-beat of raven punctuate the iambic breath of the sea – nature's metronome. Behind me are dunes shored by seagrass, wind-blown spruce and blankets of salal, plump with ripe berries. I forage to fill my oatmeal with the juicy purple fruit, the flavour and texture of overripe blueberries. By the time I finish coffee and

porridge, boiled in a small tin pot, a cloudless overcast sky's washed out daylight with a sickly pallor, the under-watt lighting of recovery rooms.

From my round little home – an above-ground Hobbit-hole – I explore the upper end of the island, driving on unpaved road, a flat muddy track through a tight corridor of towering pines. Eagles adorn treetops, neatly spaced like decor, ones and twos. I think of Hræsvelgr, the mythic Norse eagle that sits atop Yggdrasil, an ancient ash known as the World Tree, and wonder which of these birds it might be. Maybe all of them.

Through open car windows I hear squirrels chattering, scolding, and through breaks in the forest I glimpse curving ocean. A tiny bakery's hidden amongst trees. Elves, perhaps? The ones who don't cobble or make toys? Beyond that are a few strung-out campsites, inhabited, I presume, by a few strung-out individuals. More driving. Muddy road becomes metaled, the car vibrating with a constant hum, and staticky radio disappears for good. There's a pull-off, a provincial park trailhead with a map of the area. A government truck speeds in, stopping with a gravelly skid, and a big man walks briskly to the outhouse. He returns to his vehicle with a nod in my direction. I follow suit, the seat still warm.

I'm here to see Tow Hill, Rose Spit and a place called the Blowhole. I arrive at high tide, surf surging through a ragged gap in old shoreline lava, pulsing frothy breakers into the air like a tidal geyser. I walk toward Tow Hill and climb for half an hour on neat, narrow boardwalks over steep boggy ground in old growth forest. To have land so steep yet so wet hints at how much rain falls here. And the strength of the trees to hold it in place. Timber, rock, moss. There's hardly any soil, just a buildup of fallen trees, compressed and regrown.

Tree trunks glow dull scarlet in weirdly muted light. Red wood under a canopy of green – oddly Christmassy. I'm sweating now and remove two layers. There's a viewpoint, a peekaboo slice of crooked beach pointing northeast into mist like an uncertain finger. "That way, maybe?" it seems to say. A prop-plane roars overhead, following the questioning land. I lost cell service long before the car radio went, but now my phone emits a startling *bong*. It's a text: "Welcome to the USA!" And I realize the sandy finger's pointing at Alaska through the mist. Once more I feel very far from everywhere.

Partway down the hill my view's another endless swath of sand, rolling waves, a lone dirt road, then nothing but trees. This is Rose Spit, and I sit with the view a long while. The Haida Creation Story's set here, just on the horizon. I could be in the Garden of Eden, flipping through a back issue of Reader's Digest, waiting for my appointment with God.

Bill Reid captured the Story, from here, in a huge chunk of yellow cedar displayed at UBC's Museum of Anthropology entitled *The Raven and the First Men*. Haida legend says the Raven found itself alone one day, like me, here on Rose Spit, when it saw an extraordinary clamshell and protruding from it were a number of human beings. The Raven coaxed them to leave the giant shell and join the bird in this wonderful world. Some were hesitant but were soon overcome by curiosity and eventually emerged from the partially open clam to become the first Haida. When I saw the sculpture I noticed its cracks, fissures at the edge of the carving. Remarkably, splits come and go, wounds in the wood that travel and heal. This sculpture – Story of The People – a saga on a plinth, continues to live and to breathe.

In the Viking Legend of Creation, retold from Old Norse texts by Rosalind Kerven in *Viking Myths and Sagas*, "Odin, with his siblings, created the human race, on a lonely beach by the sea. From the waves they hauled two logs and breathed life into them, filling them with consciousness, movement, hearing and sight. They taught them how to speak. They clothed them. They gave them names, calling the man Ask and the woman Embla. And giantesses maintained eternal youth by way of a collection of magic apples." Ask and Embla – Viking Adam and Eve, with their magical apples. Beginning life on a desolate beach like the Haida here at Rose Spit. Biblical fusion. This place, home of The People, is more Viking than I imagined. A small, influential nation – the Haida, like Iceland. Remote. Proud. Independent. And those who arrive, I learn, tend to stay.

In a documentary, Haida Gwaii author Severn Cullis-Suzuki explains, "When I speak the language," she says, "I feel slowed down, more connected." And she describes a Haida expression – impossible in English – that refers to a blending of distant colours. When sky and sea are glued together. It's here, at Rose Spit. The Boler as well. And my painting at home – horizonless view, endless frontier.

Back at the Boler I sit with another sunset. Behind me a waxing moon, near full, rises over endless pine, tinting waves in white light. And in front of me nectarine sun dips tentative into the water, a bather easing into darkening sea. I build another small fire, igniting damp driftwood with fish oil, and enjoy the vast Renoir – glued sea and sky, the colours of stone-fruit – peach and cherry and plum. Grass on the dunes moves softly, the swish of a hula girl. In fading light I see the orangey-red starfish. It lies like a tiny person, pointing back to the sea. There's a huge clam nested in bull-kelp, naturally wrapped like a gift, swaddled in deep earthen green, and I think of the Creation Story – a clam from a beach like this, and wonder who might emerge.

I start the new day with a drive to explore Old Massett, stopping on the way at Moon-over-Naikoon, the elvish bakery in the forest, miles from anywhere. I've seen this place on TV. People come for the bread and cinnamon buns. You have to want to be here to get here, and the sweet sticky buns, I decide, make the effort worthwhile. I drive past a log-cabin library and stop at the Dixon Entrance Maritime Museum. There's a small exhibit on Viking longships, naturally. I smile, no longer surprised by the serendipity, a blind man following a thread between things he's yet to fully know.

In Old Massett Town I'm the only car on the road. A few homes, a few artists, a few fishermen. I stop the car. Eagles and ravens – living ones – sit atop phone poles on the small main road. There's one bird per pole, alternating – eagle, raven, eagle, raven – down the length of the road. Remarkable. I stare for a while. None of us move much, nor seem to care. Everything here seems part of the whole. There's a café somewhere, and I meander the car up and down the few quiet lanes to find it, having to double back a couple of times. People just know where it is. Or don't. I find it and settle in for a salmon sandwich and beef barley soup. The proprietor makes my sandwich, serves my soup.

"Enjoying it here?" he asks.

"Very much, thanks," I say, meaning it. "Peaceful."

He smiles. Nods. "It's got a pace all its own."

I’m heading home, and it’s busy at Masset airport. Maybe forty people. Fishermen mostly, on a charter. They leave and things quieten, returning somehow to normal. My plane arrives, a Beecher prop, the kind you’re forced to duck severely to enter and reach your seat, a five-and-a-half foot ceiling at best, with a high dividing step mid-cabin, requiring you to simultaneously duck and bend knees, compressing like an astronaut moving through sections of spaceship, or being digested by an insect, passing from anthrax to thorax.

I make my way to my narrow seat, a tiny window overlooking the wing. Behind me an argument breaks out, a young and uninformed woman fights passionately with an old and better informed man, discussing politics. He has substance to back up his views. She does not. Both know they’re right. And both have volume on their side. That and a small enclosed space with two hours to fill. I’ve argued both sides as I’ve aged and been right, I believe, every time. I’m sure he’s been where she is, and in a few years she too will argue his side to the next impassioned youth fresh from first semester, oblivious to the fact they don’t yet vote.

By the time we land the fight’s eased off, and somehow his bag’s caught beneath her seat. He’s apologetic as he reefs on his bag. I’m only hearing this, not really caring but pleased they’re getting along. She’s apologizing too. Two hours have dissipated hostility. She tries to raise her seat-back to let him access his bag that’s now inexplicably entangled under her seat. There’s a struggle, a curse, an “Oh-my-god!” and whatever happened, it’s apparent he’s now cut his hand. Badly. Concerned sounds. A big flight attendant makes his way back as best he can in the tight space. And I choose to simply squeeze past, exit the plane and be on my way. The cut man will be fine, I’m sure. He just needs stitches. I just lost my dad. Remembering the sign in the Golden Spruce forest I retrieve my bag and don’t look back.

HELGÖ TREASURE

I’m seated under a canopy of leafy deciduous, reviewing my viking itinerary. The beer’s light, the day dark. Fine weather, late in the day. Church bells mark the hour, ringing from a short distance away. According to a white sign on green lawn it’s the Church of Our Lord, implying, I presume, Not Yours. A plate of charcuterie’s placed on my

table and I gnaw some elk, a staple of the Sami or Laplanders – Skrithiphini – the skiing Finns. Akin to North American and Greenlandic Inuit, these northern Scandinavians maintained a lifestyle unchanged for millennia. This food's part of that culture – Viking prehistory. I follow this back in time, to nomadic Stone Age hunters crossing Western Europe, moving north as ice retreats – Caucasian Europeans passing through Germania into Jutland and Scandinavia in gradually warming climate, following game like the elk I'm determinedly chewing. As ice diminished, forestation followed. Before this, much of Europe was savannah. Trees slow the movement of game and people – forests provide food and shelter, and nomadic tendencies wane. In these conditions – warming climate, forestation and less migratory game – Northern Europeans began to settle.

These Viking forbears met and traded with the Sami on Europe's icy northern edge. Their descendants were the hairy Saxons Russell Crowe threshed from the forests of Germania in *Gladiator*. This was prior to Russell being stabbed in the back by Joaquin Phoenix – sweet vengeance for every hotel employee he ever beat up, as united they cheered their harelip hero with a rousing, "Mip-mip-urray!"

Sometime later those fur-wearing nomads took to farming and husbandry, honed their skills as shipbuilders and pushed the bounds of exploration in pursuit of resources and land. And while I haven't pushed the bounds of exploration, I've still crossed another choppy stretch of water to interact with Vikings again, or at least their artifacts. Riding a pitching vessel – albeit a nondescript ferry – felt apropos, rolling sea still lingering in my legs.

I finally finish my elk, have a short sleep and, with a view of Victoria harbour, make my way to a travelling Viking exhibit under clear morning sky. The mammoth that greets me at Victoria's Royal B.C. Museum is a furry reminder of those Mesolithic nomads from whom the Vikings descended in the form of the game they hunted to extinction. It's no wonder. You could feed and clothe a family with each kill. I think of a Wayne Dyer talk in which he refers to The First Recipe – take one mammoth, apply fire, consume.

Many of those nomadic hunters, equipped with fur, fire and one recipe, settled around the Jutland Peninsula – present-day Denmark, a desirable area with easily accessible seafood, nesting birds and forests abundant

with game. But what their single recipe didn't consider was just how much wood it takes to fuel a fire sufficient enough to grill a mammoth (even to rare), not to mention keeping a family warm through northern hemisphere winters. And as the earliest Scandinavians lived on, those old growth forests ensconcing them between the North and Baltic Seas dwindled with the mammoths.

Fast forward a few generations and what's left is a growing Scandinavian population with a shrinking food supply and diminishing forests. Smaller forests mean less game, and the troubling cycle continued. So they took to the water, firstly to access food – fishing, sealing and whaling – and then for other resources – timber and arable land. Precious remaining trees were used to construct boats, firstly dugouts for short trips in shallow rivers and fjords, and then Scandinavians made a key technological leap in shipbuilding with the invention of the keel. This set them apart as advanced seafaring people with the ability to build and sail bigger boats capable of handling larger bodies of water – the Baltic, North Sea and Atlantic. Ships were clinker-built, overlapped planks held together by rope, nail or rivet. This manner of shipbuilding creates a near-elastic structural integrity; boats flex like living things, partnering with the water.

One of these ships – a knorr – sits at the museum entrance near the mammoth. It's a well-aged replica of the *Krampmacken*, a Viking merchant ship, stout and wide in the beam, a ship for cargo and commerce. This ship was sailed from Gotland, Sweden, across the Baltic through eastern European rivers to Istanbul, retracing Swedish Rus Viking routes to Asia. It's a fine welcome to the exhibit and I feel the modern world, the present, slip away.

In *Vikings*, Oliver also references the 1958 film *The Vikings*, which, he explains, fuelled a childhood fascination with the Norsemen. It's a great film. Tony Curtis as a young slave with royal blood, Ernest Borgnine as a lusty Norse king, every line punctuated with his trademark "Har-har-har!" and Kirk Douglas as the jaw-clenched star, thrusting his chin cleft and letting it be known to all, by God, that he is ACTING! And in the equally well done but slow moving 2013 BBC documentary *Blood of The Vikings*, they too can't help but cut away to sweeping scenes from the same Hollywood epic. And when the documentary drags a bit, as all four-hour

documentaries do, bogged down by the tedium of archaeologists brushing bits of shit off other shit, the BBC producers had the good sense to intersperse it with lively reenactments of Vikings butchering English clergy, which invariably makes for enjoyable viewing.

But I'm not here to watch movies or TV, and I methodically work my way through the exhibits until I discover what I came for – Sweden's Helgö treasure. Oliver describes these items as possibly the most intriguing to encapsulate the Viking Age, defining the reaches of exploration and trade. Three items in bronze: a Coptic ladle from Egypt, a small Buddha idol from northern India, possibly Pakistan, and the headpiece of a bishop's crozier from Ireland, all found on the Holy Island of Helgö, just west of Stockholm. Precious objects from Africa, Asia, Europe – south, east and west, hoarded in the north. The historical, religious and geographical diversity of these three items from a single Viking archeological site hint at the range and breadth of Viking activity – travel and trade spanning more of the globe than we may ever know.

I continue through the museum. A video plays in a loop and I end up watching TV after all. It's a short film of the *Sea Stallion* sailing a lumpy sea. This is the world's largest reconstructed Viking longship, a thirty-meter replica of *Skuldelev II* from the Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde, just outside Copenhagen. A traditional warship, the *Stallion*, like the *Skuldelev*, was built for speed, to accommodate sixty warriors. In strong wind it out-sails modern ships of comparable size – a fearsome, beautiful thing. Built in Ireland, the *Stallion* completed an epic voyage from Roskilde to Dublin, to where it began, a thousand nautical miles away. I lose myself in the film – heaving through Nordic waves, the creak of vibrating wood, snap of sail, and once more my legs feel the pulse of ocean.

A short stagger ahead is another unique exhibit. A ship, or part of a ship, that's not a ship. It's the craft's skeletal outline, made up solely of iron rivets. The rivets, found at a Viking boat-building site, have been hung, suspended from the ceiling on varying lengths of fine, nearly invisible line. All the rivets are in place, just as they would be in the constructed ship, but without wood planking. As with a young-woman-old-woman diagram, shift visual focus and you no longer see hanging rivets but the hull of a ship, a prow or a stern, joined in a curving rise.

This is what stays in my mind on the ferry ride home – the gentle curve of a handcrafted ship, woodwork and iron, sailcloth and resin, constructed by artisans. Now I'm riding a block of welded steel, seaworthy despite its design, a diesel-fuelled parking garage. But it's been a worthwhile excursion – a drive and a ferry to the Helgö treasure – some of the most intriguing Viking artifacts anywhere. I'm left wondering what's next.

VISIT WITH A VIKING (ARCHAEOLOGIST)

Once more I'm watching TV, glued to a Viking documentary filmed in Sweden. There's an interview with a Viking archaeologist affiliated with a university near our home. Who knew you could find Viking archaeologists in the Pacific Northwest? Apparently there are two. They're rarely around, invariably digging in the UK, Scandinavia or the Baltic. But with determination and bonhomie, I track down one of the pair from the TV show, who happens to be doing research nearby. I describe my viking/Viking trail (depending on context) and explain I'd value their input. The person on the line is friendly, intrigued, and we arrange to meet.

Over coffee I describe my saga, my ongoing wanderjahre, and ask the things you'd want to ask a Viking expert. This is my first visit with an archaeologist and I was half-expecting a pistol and bullwhip, admittedly knowing little of the field beyond Indiana Jones. And although I wasn't aware of a whip or sidearm on their person, this individual's an affable academic, with a south London accent and good stories of Scottish universities in oil towns where pastimes are drinking and fighting. I ask what site or artifact was personally most significant and why?

There's a reflective pause, and then, "I'd have to say sailing aboard the *Sea Stallion* at Roskilde." And here I'd been excited just watching footage of this ship smashing through waves under full sail. "The social element. Communication. Overcoming conflict," the doctor explains. "With sixty oarsmen, that physical distance down the length of the ship – with the noise of wind and water, oars and sail – you can't hear what's being shouted. You literally need a midshipman, relaying orders from bow to stern." Part of this scholar's work focuses on social conflict, making the time at sail – coordinated effort in a heavily crewed ship – a revealing hands-on experiment.

“To experience that, in person, was remarkable,” the doctor smiles. “You have to understand, most of my work is desk-based. To touch something makes it very real. And in Gamla Uppsala, at Valsgärde.” I nod, knowing this is on Sweden’s Fyris River, a regal burial site from the Vendel Age – sixth to eighth century, immediately preceding the Viking Age, considered pre- or proto-Vikings.

“Handling a sword – a real Viking sword, even with latex gloves, is unnerving.” There’s a long pause, followed by, “Intense.” To which I smile. Don’t rush an archeologist when they’re searching for something, even the right words. There’s another, longer pause, and then the doctor adds, “Living archeology.”

We sip more coffee and swap stories of places we’ve been, Viking research the common thread. Then my new friend forwards me literature I probably couldn’t have gotten myself – something from university archives – the detailed account of Ahmad ibn Fadlan, the tenth-century Arab traveller and writer, from his time with the Rusiyyah – Swedish Rus Vikings in Russia, where he witnessed a boat-burning funeral and wrote: “… wood for kindling the fire was prepared. The closest relative of the deceased approached, and took a piece of wood, kindled it and then walked backwards to the boat, keeping his face turned toward the spectators, holding the burning brand in one hand … He was naked and walked backwards until he reached the boat and set fire to the wood that had been prepared beneath the boat. Then the people came with kindling and other firewood, each having a brand burning at the end, and laid this stick in the pile of wood. Fire then spread through the wood and spread to the kindling, the boat, the man … and everything that was in the boat. A strong and violent wind sprang up through which the flames were fanned and greatly enhanced.”

I think of the flames – the Olympic cauldron firing my imagination, cathartic release associated with burning, conclusions, renewal, and rituals like Up Helly Aa – the Viking fire festival in Shetland. In *Crowds and Power*, Elias Canetti explains the mesmerizing effect of things that draw people together, called crowd symbols. “There are crowd symbols in nature – fire is one, and the sea is a distinct one.”

I continue with the ibn Fadlan account: “A man of the Rusiyyah was standing beside me and I heard him talking to the interpreter, and I asked

what the Rus had said to him. The interpreter answered that he said, ‘They, the Arab communities, are stupid.’ So I asked, ‘Why?’ He said, ‘You go and cast into the earth the people whom you both love and honor most among men. Then the earth, creeping things, and worms devour them. We, however, let them burn for an instant, and accordingly he enters into paradise at once in that very hour.’” Commemoration through fire. No different than England’s Guy Fawkes celebrations – bonfires and fireworks recognizing the failed attempt of the man from York to blow up Westminster Parliament. Flames purge. And heal.

Now, like signal fires crossing the countryside I see my viking trail renewed, a passed torch, heading to Guy Fawkes’ fiery home – the Viking town of Jórvík. As our coffee cups are refilled, I articulate my evolving travel plans, then ask, “Was it predominantly Norse in Dublin and Danes in York?” wanting to frame my exploration.

The doctor sips coffee, thinking. “It’s more complex than that. We use the term Hiberno-Norse.” This is a blending of ethnicity – immigrants and locals – the melting pot of maritime nations. “There were actually more Norse in York, like Ireland – very multicultural – a ‘creoleing’ of language.” Like the pidgin of seafarers and port cities. “Viking archeology is world archeology. Birka, for example, a key Viking site, was very cosmopolitan. And the Dorset dig – from the late Viking Age – unearthed fifty decapitated bodies; a mass grave. Isotope data showed the group to be widely diverse, from all over Scandinavia, the Baltic and Iceland.”

Isotope analysis can determine, through teeth for example, where an individual grew up, based on isotopes found in the water one drank in childhood. In other words, geographic location and lineage can be pinpointed on the map. In the case of the Dorset dig this group of warriors, killed collectively, were as diverse as a UN contingent. This wasn’t regional ethnic cleansing. It was an eradication of Vikings.

“You don’t hear much about Vikings in Finland or the Baltic states,” I say.

“No, the Finns weren’t known for their boatbuilding. We know more of the Sami, the Laps, from that area. But there’s a recent find in Estonia – the Salme boat burial.”

To which the doctor forwards me an article from *World Archeology*. I’m sure you’re familiar with it, but in case your subscription lapsed, I copy

the story verbatim: “Warriors cut down in battle on the Estonian island of Saaremaa were buried aboard their ship – the earliest known Viking vessel to sail across the Baltic Sea. Nearby is a smaller boat, its slain sitting eerily upright. Who are these dead men? Jüri Peets reveals his discovery of a mysterious double Viking ship burial. Bone and artifacts began to appear almost as soon as workmen cut into the earth. They were laying an electric cable for a cycle path through the tiny village of Salme on the island of Saaremaa in Estonia. Work stopped immediately, and the archaeologists were called in. That was in 2008. By the time excavations were complete, in 2012, they had revealed a most extraordinary discovery: two Viking boat burials, within 30m of each other, and both dating to about AD 750, the very beginning of the Viking period. The larger of the vessels is the first known example of a sailing ship to cross the Baltic Sea. Both are about 100 years older than the Oseberg boat in Norway – the earliest example of a Viking boat to be found in the region. And both bore a grim cargo: the remains of several men killed in battle. Alongside the dead were the possessions they had carried with them in life: their weapons, gaming pieces, knives, whetstones, and combs. None of the artifacts recovered at Salme come from this region: they belonged to a style associated with Scandinavian settlements across the Baltic Sea. These men, then, were strangers to these shores.”

I ask the doctor to walk me through it.

“This is the Vendel Period again – pre-Viking. But they’re keeled boats, probably Swedish. The bodies are stacked and covered with shields. They died from conflict, in combat.”

So here we have new findings showing Vikings – early Vikings – travelling east to raid. Elite warriors, experienced fighter-voyagers, defeated and killed on a foreign shore. Yet buried with care and honour, delivered to Valhalla. Who did they fight? And who lay them to rest? The only certain answer is that Vikings were around longer and travelling further than previously believed.

We talk a bit more about isotope analysis. The Oseberg ship, for example, was an early Norwegian boat burial of two women – one old and one young. Now, through isotope analysis, we know the younger was from Persia. Was this a servant of the old woman? Or vice versa? If so, it’s

interesting to think someone from a distant land – a foreigner – rose to such rank as to warrant a royal funeral.

“Isotope analysis gets done on the decapitated heads. That’s the work of the skullers,” the doctor explains.

“That’s what they’re called?” I say with a grin, “Skullers?”

A confused look. Then I realize the word is scholars, with an English accent. After a brief who’s-on-first, we get it sorted.

“The fact she was from Persia’s interesting,” I say, “Because I’ve thought of that link with the Lewis Chessmen – the game from Persia.”

“The Lewis Chessmen? Persia?”

“The *game* of chess,” I say, “From Persia. So I associate a Viking link there.”

“I hadn’t thought of that connection,” the expert replies with an approving nod.

As coffee’s topped up, the doctor recaps for my notetaking. The Viking Age began in the 700s. Small, regional raids, like those documented in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* – with references to Danes, used to describe all Scandinavians for a time. By the 800s bigger groups of Vikings arrived in the British Isles. Campaigns were longer but still seasonal. As with the Huns and Mongols, warfare was a mobile undertaking – sorties and raids rather than sieges. Then the Danes – Vikings – began to winter abroad, building long-ports, or longphorts, a kind of migrating.

As Scandinavians migrated they brought entire families – not only “shield-wives” but mothers with children. These are waterborne immigrants travelling across Europe looking for a place to live – to settle, farm and make home. These aren’t wandering nomads. These are ninth-century refugees, farmers, craftspeople and jewellers who could sail and knew how to fight. This was the Great Army, a generic term used to describe an East Anglian invasion in 865. And despite words like army and invasion, when a group moves in uninvited they aren’t necessarily looking for confrontation, just a place to settle and start anew. No different than Europe today.

Our bill arrives, I thank the doctor, and parting ways I ask what else I should know.

“Well, being English, our history’s egocentric. But the Vikings’ greatest legacy is the creation of countries that make up Europe today. We wouldn’t have England, France, Russia, or Germany as we know it. It’s because of the Vikings destabilizing what was there – small groups upending large kingdoms, a disproportionate grassroots upheaval, albeit grassroots from abroad. And towns. The first towns in Ireland were founded, created by Vikings. Each Scandinavian town – urbanization in that part of the world – is a Viking invention. And it’s important to remember the Vikings as not exclusively barbaric. They were traders and artists. A violent legacy, like all history, comes and goes with writers and changing research.”

MEET THE CORVIDS

Staring out our apartment window, I’m mulling newfound archeological knowledge. Sun’s dropping and the crows are flying to their rookeries. In a swath of urban cottonwoods they nest en masse – Common and American species. I was there once, around midnight, in a dark and quiet parking lot. I swung the car around and my headlights swept over more crows than I could comprehend – something from Stephen King or Hitchcock on acid. Thousands of crows shuffling on the asphalt, the look of an endless chain-gang, awesome and unnerving.

Corvids of every kind: crows, jackdaws, choughs, rooks and ravens, keep turning up on my trail, the genus and Vikings sharing traits – magpies of myth – travellers, gatherers of shiny valuables, and nesters. The Helgö hoard and Norse tradition of building into, onto existing cultures are examples. Another being the melting pot of language. Norse-Saxon words now comprise one third of English, peppering language like coarse spice. Raven itself being a Norse-Icelandic word, the corvid of Viking legend.

A path in North Vancouver pays homage to these birds, winding between houses, industry and forest – a blend of pavement and dirt snaking through Indigenous land – another place of sacred ravens. Midway, a suspension bridge dips beneath a hidden eagles’ nest. It’s called the Spirit Trail – a multi-branched path, home to ravens, crows and an organic extension of my current track. So I follow the crows, more or less, to the Spirit Trail. On the path, beneath tall evergreens, are a series of

rocks – gray granite, some round, others flat, discrete in the undergrowth. Every few meters one of the stones is engraved – words, images and stories called *Site Memories, Murmuring Crows*. One image is a bird in flight, another's emerging from beneath a cedar. It's easy to miss, the art a subtle extension of the land. I note some of the words embossed on the rocks: "Murmuring crows create connections from the past to the present, from the natural world to the industrial, from the world of site memories to the present day." Another states, "Crows appear in world mythology in various roles as soothsayer, creator and cleanser." Near the end of the path one reads, "Many cultures believe the crow sees the past, present and future all at once." Which resonates, the notion of corvids blurring time. Einstein would approve – time and space not absolute – things bend, fluid as history.

I know people who've befriended ravens and crows. One individual has a range of calls, similar to squawks and staccato throat-singing. The birds' range of vocalization – their language – is remarkable. I've heard crows hiss when hunting as a team, sibilant sounds to flush things from tall grass, with the disposition of feral cats, only smarter. Interacting, I've found, is tolerated, just don't make eye contact. That's the deal-breaker. Get as close as you like but don't meet their gaze. And I wonder if these birds – crows, ravens, other corvids, can actually see past, present and future simultaneously. How close *are* we to Raven-Floki? To finding new worlds? Or have we ever left the old?

The raven in our living room painting's still inspiring but no longer mysterious. Having gone to the "edge of the world" to find the boat it accompanies, I feel I've cracked the safe, looked inside like Geraldo Rivera at Al Capone's vault. But rather than seeing it empty I envision blank canvas. Where will the bird, or birds, lead this time? Floki had his ravens, Noah his twig-wielding dove. Polynesians too – those tattooed seafarers who set out to find new homes, viking by way of outrigger and sailing waka. Not with ravens or doves but a golden plover – the little shorebird that crosses oceans, flying the globe. It was one of these the Polynesians followed across the Pacific to Hawaii.

In the ibn Fadlan account he describes Swedish Rus Vikings as "perfect physical specimens, tall as palm-trees, with blond hair and ruddy skin. They are tattooed from fingernails to neck with dark blue or dark green

tree patterns and other figures, and all men are armed with an axe, sword and long knife." Tattooed warriors taking to the sea, akin to Polynesians. Different ships and weaponry, but ambition and body art very much the same. And like water finding its course in tattoo swirls, my trail's now launching me onto another tributary. I think of explorers Livingstone, Burton and Speke seeking the elusive source of the Nile, and decide going west from here makes sense, following Drake, Cook and another inky legion of wave-riding voyagers descended from gods.

CAPTAIN COOK – MAN AND PLACE

It's 1976. Summer Olympics are in Montreal. Bruce Jenner's all the buzz, the female decathlete dominating every men's event to win gold. And Coca-Cola has a promotion celebrating the bicentennial of Captain Cook's second sailing of *HMS Resolution*, the start of his third epic voyage which departed from Plymouth in July of 1776. I assume McDonalds and Bic sewed up Olympic sponsorship. On the playground we kids had memorized the Big Mac song and learned how to throw a ballpoint pen like a javelin, replicating TV ads for the OlymBics. If McDonalds and Bic *didn't* beat out Coke for sponsorship and Coke simply chose to ignore the Games and throw their resources into the Cook bicentennial, I can only imagine the speed those execs were on the street, wearing barrels.

But Mad Men and executive career paths were the furthest thing from my nine-year-old mind. I was on a mission, collecting as much swag from the good people at Coke as I could during summer vacation. The contest was a simple one – gather rubbery liners from the underside of Coke bottle lids and caps, bundle them up and choose your prizes. Things ranged from coasters and glasses to bar towels and the granddaddy of collectibles – a tea tray in attractive but dangerously flexible tin, the thickness and strength of aluminum foil. And I took it upon myself to collect it *all*. By consuming a dentist's dreams-worth of Coke products I managed to gather a shocking quantity of coke bottle liners. The key was to forego value, steer clear of the two-liter jobs and focus exclusively on six-packs of small bottles – the highest concentration of cap liner to beverage and therefore most efficient means of stockpiling prize-worthy liners, other than simply buying and dumping product – a strategy I

considered for a short time, but a lifetime's training of wasting-and-wanting-not precluded such a profligate approach.

There's an addictive quality to collecting and I admit to quickly becoming a little junkie, jonesing for my next sugary liquid, rubber liner fix. The liners even felt good – a smooth, intoxicating malleability like rubber cement and booger. My stash of liners grew, followed by the indulgent luxury of poring through the prize catalogue – all that "free" stuff, decorative trinkets that only cost a few hundred dollars in Coke and a few thousand dollars in future dental bills.

Everyone in my family received Captain Cook–themed gifts for Christmas that year – the kind of things one might receive with a gas station fill or from a great-aunt clearing shit from her attic. Each item featured Cook in one of his three stances (he wouldn't pose for portraits): one holding a chart, one looking thoughtful, superimposed on a globe, and one with a Columbus-esque feel, the Captain pointing with confidence toward the horizon. If memory serves, in each he held a cool, refreshing Coke.

Back to the present. Everything's black, broken by the sweep of headlights. I'm driving highway with no one around. It's predawn dark, graveyard quiet. The road's a meandering strip of pocked asphalt hugging the Big Island of Hawaii's rugged west coast. When Mark Twain was here he described the dormant lava as "a petrified sea." A long-dead ocean lies beneath me, a living one beyond, somewhere in the dark. The blackness on the mauka–mountain side is desolate lava with the occasional sprig of foliage, while on the makai–water side it's an unnerving mix of rocky cliff and empty space.

I'm driving south from Kohala through Kailua-Kona, now approaching the rural community of Captain Cook. After an hour in the car there's the faintest essence of morning sun, a dimmed bulb forgotten overnight. The highway carries on south and east, wrapping around America's most southerly point, past beaches of black sand, green sand, pink sand, and fiery molten lava creeping to the sea. Advisory reports are being broadcast constantly as the lava's proceeding fifteen to twenty feet a day. It's now a

few hundred feet from a shopping centre and a school and will soon destroy the main road. A secondary dirt track's been cleared by army and highway crews to keep residents from being stranded. Brush fires have sprung up as lava moves down the slope of Kilauea, burning out or contained by fire-break ditches. Vog lingers over the southeast skyline. Up close it stings the eyes and affects breathing. Pele is unhappy. Not the Brazilian soccer star. (I don't know *what* that sellout's feeling.) Pele the volcano goddess. I'd say she was just blowing off steam, but that's a tad obvious and not entirely accurate. She's actually spewing – a sort of magma reflux.

I veer from the highway to a miles-long dead-end road, barely two cars wide, that snakes to the water in dramatic switchbacks and sharp undulations. The car nearly flows to the ocean like the molten lava one ridgeline over. Pavement here's new, fresh ebony – better than the highway. Through open car windows I hear birds start their day – cooing doves, chattering mynas and the chirp of finches and cardinals. Two junglefowl cocks strut across the road, literally cocky, flaunting regal plumage.

Dropping toward sea level I'm changing climatic zones. Gone is upcountry desert and semi-tropical. I've entered proper jungle and the funk of rotting vegetation's heavy and cloying. It's cool but air's thick with humidity. I have to flick windshield wipers to clear moisture. The occasional home's tucked into thick greenery under canopies of ferns and palms. Cell service died up the hill by the highway and I wonder what it's like to live here – exotic, smelly, on the edge of the grid. (A year later this part of the island would be hit with dengue fever, 250 locals affected or hospitalized. The year after that, Zika virus. I was concerned but not surprised.)

I park the car where the road ends, cinch my cap, and walk a few hundred meters in strong onshore wind. There's a crumbling old concrete pier poking into angry water. The snaggletooth shoreline's chunky black lava, gorgeous but threatening to a kayaker, which is what I am this morning. I'm joining a small group of paddler-tourists and two guides to cross Kealakekua Bay to snorkel one of Hawaii's best diving reefs. On the distant shore is a monument to Captain Cook. He landed here in *HMS Resolution* in 1779, a year after landing at Waimea, Kauai – what he

called Owhyhee, or the Sandwich Islands – three years after leaving Plymouth (with a boatload of Coke, I presume). I'm paddling to where he was killed.

As an explorer he was exceptional, as a humanitarian, better than most, but at the end of the day he claimed other people's land for other people and contributed to killing off too many. I understand all that's wrong with the age of exploration but the rest of it – adventure and discovery – I love. I've wanted to come to this spot on the island for a long time. Doing so isn't easy. The Cook monument's almost inaccessible by land and requires park permits that seem impossible to acquire. Most visitors to this northerly point of Kealakekua Bay gain access by water, with a tour. The tour operators handle park access permits, shuttling people in by motorized boats and rhibs, while the rest of us get here under our own power in tandem kayaks. Standing on the corner of the disintegrating jetty I gaze at lumpy, unwelcoming sea. "The Pacific is a strange place," wrote Robert Louis Stevenson. Agreed. Beautiful and temperamental. But Cook stated, "Such risks as these are the unavoidable companions of the man who goes on discoveries."

We launch from the pier – the south end of the bay, waves rising and dropping our boats a meter with each blue-green surge. We're using wide, open hull sea-kayaks in bright orange and yellow – sturdy plastic boats, tough to flip. The greatest risk is being battered on rocks, lava and coral, of which there's a lot. This, combined with high wind and waves, forces us to work hard on the water, particularly when close to shore. A deep ocean trough runs through the bay, making strong undercurrents below the windy surface. Unlike our kayaks, the two forces rarely work in tandem, and the back-and-forth feels like a watery tug of war.

The bay's jewel green in the shallows, darkening to violet blue as it deepens. An underwater hot spring's part of the volcanic rift, and mid-crossing the deep water changes instantly from cool to warm – a hot pool in the centre of the wavy inlet. A sheer cliff rises above the bay – six hundred feet high. I read a brochure describing the height at a jaw-dropping 600" (inches), reminding me of Spinal Tap's 18" Stonehenge.

But with an actual height of seven *thousand* inches or so, the embankment came into being a million years ago, when seismic activity sheared the island, sending a massive piece of coastline into the water and

leaving this cliff like neatly sliced cake. Geologists discovered pieces of rock only found here on Big Island high up the hills of Maui, tossed there in the ensuing tidal wave. This also resulted in the trench that runs directly beneath us, an abyss plunging nine hundred feet to the ocean floor. And although these factors can make kayaking a challenge, it's a welcoming habitat for marine life. Spinner dolphins frequent the bay, coming in to sleep in the manner they do, porpoising in a semi-catatonic state. The reef's abundant with tropical fish, whales are common outside the bay and sharks are rare. In other words, it's an idyllic locale. I suspect if Cook had had a say in choosing a final resting place, he might well have chosen this very spot.

I could describe the bay but I'll leave it to Tony Horwitz, who does it well in *Blue Latitudes*: "The cliff rising from the bay was a sheer thousand-foot wall of lava, half a mile across, plunging so sharply to the water that the shoreline was impassable. The cliff's face was multihued, separated into bands of black and bluish-gray and rust and chocolate, and pitted with lava tubes, miles-long cavities formed as the crust of the molten rock cooled. Miraculously, this lava precipice sprouted life: plugs of feathery beige grass that looked at a distance like shredded wheat spilled from the ledge above. At the cliff's base, a strand line of bleached coral speckled the black lava boulders. And the water lapping against the shore was a colour I'd never seen before, mingling patches of violet, ink, and royal blue, yet startlingly clear."

The shredded wheat Horwitz describes is pili grass. And while he rounds up generously on the height of the cliff I'll cut him some slack as his writing's excellent and the rest is spot on. The cliffs were used to dispatch islanders sentenced to death, where they'd be tossed from the top. Others would wait at the bottom to make sure the job was done, in case the sixty-storey plummet onto sharp rocks didn't do it.

Having crossed the bay we make our way to forested shore, paddling through a break in the reef, avoiding rock and eddies. It's early and we're first to arrive. It'll get busy with boats and divers but for now it's peaceful and ours. A dirt trail winds through wild trees growing as though conscious of personal space, tidily isolated ironwoods and eucalypts. We pass lava-rock walls first built when Polynesians arrived five hundred years ago. A hurricane knocked much of it down twenty years back but

local volunteers rebuilt, stacking gnarly lava-stone by hand. Roofless walled enclosures sit on either side of the trail. Originally one stored canoes – dugouts and outriggers – while the other housed fishing gear – nets and floats, sinkers, lines and ti-leaves for hukilau fishing – the communal herding of fish into thrown nets, basis of *The Hukilau Song*.

Along the trail we find skinny young koa trees and pluck green leaves to clean our masks, the waxy coating creating an anti-fog agent. Our little group breaks up and plunges into the water, finding our own space like the conscientious trees. I watch an array of tangs, some humuhumus, parrot-fish munching brain coral, and a needle-nosed fish that could pass for an oboe with fins. The water's deep and clear and liberating, the reef busy with life.

After our dive we share cookies and local oranges – ugly green-brown fruit that's sweet and juicy. One of our group insists she saw a hammerhead shark. I'm skeptical and can't read the guides' reaction – courteous skepticism or controlled concern. Either way, we get back in the water, launch boats and paddle back the way we came, passing a pod of spinner dolphins putting on a spectacular show, one of the pod doing back-flips as though headlining at SeaWorld.

My kayak partner and I find our rhythm, skimming along and getting to know each other. She's from Houston, pleasant and friendly. Her husband and teenage daughter are in another boat, neither pleasant nor friendly. (I got the best of the bunch.) She's enjoying the day, good-natured and enthusiastic, and calls over to a guide, humour in her voice, "When are we gonna' see whales? I'm ready to see whales now!"

Not missing a beat, he calls back, "And should I get them to blow rainbows out their blowholes for you?"

"Say, that'd be great!" she replies.

Which stokes my superstition – that part reserved for sporting events – certain she's jinxed it, like saying "shutout" to the goalie halfway through a game. But despite my concern, humpbacks appear moments later. Maybe my paddling partner's demand worked. Or someone, somewhere, had it cued. Possibly Ralph Fiennes as Zeus. Or Poseidon. I can't keep them straight. But I imagine the scene:

"Release the Kraken!"

An awkward pause.

“I say, release the Kraken!!!”

A soft voice off-screen, “Um, we haven’t got any.”

“What?!!”

“No Kraken, I’m afraid.”

“Oh. Right. Well, then. Release the whales!”

Now we’re roughly in the middle of the bay, towering cliff behind, purply water beneath and nothing but rollers to the horizon. Someone shouts, “Whale!” And a few hundred meters from our kayaks several humpbacks roll, followed by the slow vertical flip of flukes. Breaching follows, a remarkable show of tandem leaps – blubbery double-rainbows in flight. And a prolonged period of spy-hopping, the whales bobbing vertically in the water, heads up, like massive gray fire hydrants watching us pass.

“Look! Look at the whales!” our guide hollers too loudly, letting us know what a great time we’re having. Almost, but not *quite* taking credit for the show, a less than subtle reminder gratuities are appreciated. Same way the barista “accidentally” knocks the tip jar with a rattle as they pass you your change.

Back on shore I towel down and flop into the car. For the long humid drive I crank up 101.5 FM (“Your Feel-Good Island Station”) playing upbeat reggae, hybrid Jawaiian and slack-key guitar. With open windows and tropical breeze the last of the morning swirls like good wine, a well-rounded, leisurely leg on our trail.

PILI

“You ridden much?” asks Dan, one of the stable-hands and guides.

“Only once,” I say.

“Oh. Well, this is Pili. He’s the worst of the lot. Miserable horse, hates everyone and every other horse. And every horse hates him. You gotta take charge, don’t let up. He’ll test you. Beat him up if you have to. Don’t worry. You can’t hurt him. Nothing can.”

I trot Pili – a robust chestnut – away from the stable as Carla rides up. She’s the other guide, an effusive Hawaiian who grew up in the saddle.

Her daughter was in the saddle at three weeks old, she says proudly. Now, as a two-year-old, Carla's daughter is an accomplished rider. The family lives off the grid – solar power, propane and generator, growing most of their food. I find myself envying the childhood Carla's daughter enjoys. Maybe she'd envy mine.

"You ride a lot?" Carla asks.

"Only once."

"Oh. That's Pili. Do you know about Pili?"

"I've heard. Anything else I should know?"

"Yeah, keep him away from the other horses. He's always looking for a fight." She pauses, then adds, "The vet kinda botched the castration. So now we call him half nuts." I'm left to wonder if she means Pili or the vet. And with a smile she rides away, a single fluid motion.

As other riders mount up, I visit with a man from Chicago. After introductions he tells me how much he loves the Pacific Northwest. "Been there a ton, for work," he says. "Weeks at a time. And it's always beautiful and sunny. Always," he laughs. "People talk about the rain, but I've never seen it. Never."

He asks what brought me out to paniolo country, to spend a day in paradise rattling my kidneys like a paint-can in a mixer. In shit-kicker boots and canvas duster I rather look the part, and setting my jaw I say, "I suppose I wanted to dress like a cowboy."

He nods assent, giving me a Clint Eastwood squint. "I get that," he says. But as I don the optional helmet, needless to say, my appearance changes radically – less Jack Palance, more Special Needs.

We mount up, a dozen of us including Dan and Carla, and make our way from the stables onto a rising paddock of tufted grass and rich earth. The ranch sprawls over five thousand acres, undulating with volcanic landscape. With a chorus of *ch'k-ch'k-ch'k* we trot our loose line through tall Norfolk pines, a woodsy fence-like windbreak, the lowest branches dangling to the horses, and we're forced to duck low in the saddle to avoid thick boughs and gnarly needles.

"Don't let the horses graze!" were our instructions. And as we pass amongst the trees each horse proceeds like disciplined military. Except for

Pili, who stops dead to pluck and munch Norfolk cones, a horrific sound like rocks in a blender. And I wonder if he may in fact be an Icelandic horse, as he seems to have an extra gait all his own. Not so much a fast canter between amble and gallop, but more an idling *fuck you* somewhere between belligerence and disdain. With a few inhumane kicks I manage to move us through the trees, and before long the two of us seem to have a feel for each other, maybe even mutual respect. I stop counting gaits and the rest of our time together goes well.

It's a leisurely, enjoyable ride. We canter a while, gallop a bit, and spend time trotting and walking. The land is high and steep, views stunning. From three thousand feet I watch humpbacks breach far below. A band of striated cumulus – the cloud forest – offers fleeting round rainbows, pockets of cheer at five thousand feet. I break up a fight when Pili gets ornery, charging and biting a pair of nags, and find it best to keep a distance from the others. We cross a creek, delve through ditches and pick our way through grazing cows, calves and massive bulls.

After a few hours I find myself nodding with fatigue, the methodical rocking of the ride a pleasant, rigorous rock-a-bye. I can see how riders sleep in the saddle, and think of the King's Trail that follows the shore, linking this Kohala Coast to Kailua – lava trail with raised rock edges like tiny guardrails horses won't deviate from. Sleeping in the saddle was an integral facet of long-distance travel, riders napping as horses carried on, literally staying on track.

HOKULE'A AND HEYERDAHL

Back on two feet, I'm beachcombing at Anaeho'omalu Bay. Still on my viking trail, despite warm beach and palm trees, my saga revealing itself like Maui hauling these islands up from the seabed. Same way he did in the South Pacific, standing on New Zealand's canoe-shaped South Island to pull in the North, the whole coming together with a heave. A kukui nut's washed ashore and I break it open with a lava shard, munching away like Robinson Crusoe. Sea turtles loll on the breakers, drifting in lava outcrops. Humpbacks spout and roll on the horizon, forty feet of languid porpoising and repeated breaches. I stop counting after thirty colossal leaps and simply enjoy the show. Meanwhile a shoreline fisherman shakes an eel from his line.

“That’s the second one,” he says, “or the same one for the second time.”

Using his foot he eases the thing into foamy surf where it wriggles back to the sea. I wish the man luck and walk into the surf, following the eel and swimming away from shore. The smell of an imu pit wafts over the water, smoky and appetizing. Palm fronds swish and clack. Beyond a shallow reef water chills as it deepens and gold-finned fish surround me in schools like brisling sardines.

Back on shore, hermit crabs are seeking new shells to inhabit, to grow into. They’ll try them on, check for fit, and discard the old, only emerging, naked, at times of greatest vulnerability – birth, sex, death. Unlike their neighbours, nautiluses, who simply grow more shell, eliminating compartments once deemed invaluable. The growth-maturing cycle continues until the shape and beauty of old age makes them artful and buoyant, their ambling drift directed with the season and tide. I’m floating in the same manner, under cloud puffs and robin’s egg sky. A chunky silver fish with a black spot on its head and whiskers swims nearby. There’s a spiny urchin and brain coral below. I see this by turning my head, relaxed and spread-eagled on my back in the water, and marvel, never having floated this effortlessly – more than saline buoyancy, a combination of relaxed light breathing, some air held in the lungs and pelvis raised. I lose track of time, floating and drifting, directed by a gentle current, as though I’ve just remembered I can fly.

After a very long while I go back to the beach, sitting on driftwood atop lava. A green walking stick skitters up my arm and refuses to move. I hear the breath of a turtle, the sound human. A green fish like an eel drifts, long and rigid, between lava and coral, the water clear as an aquarium. Then a game fish leaps dramatically. Trevally? I have my fishing rod and plunge after it, casting as it leaps again. But I rush, cutting my foot on shell in the rock, and hobble back to shore. Blood drips onto lava with a chemical reaction I can’t explain. My blood turns so vibrantly red it looks artificial. A painter would give anything to fabricate this shade of crimson, ghastly but beautiful – something about the contrast on black with the tint of sea and sun.

I wrap a bag around my foot, knotting it tight as I can, and limp home. Shell’s imbedded deep in the ball of my foot and it’s not until day’s end that I muster the courage to dig it out – make it worse to make it better.

Like the hermit crab, only growing by embracing vulnerability. With a bandaged, elevated foot I imagine being back in the water, drifting along in a longship wake on a visualized map, my interpretation of reality. In *The Songlines*, Bruce Chatwin writes of Australian Aboriginals mapping through song, part of the Dreamtime – weaving place with people. Like descendants of Genghis Khan scattered through Afghan mountains, where village names and distances are still chanted to recount footpaths, memorized walking maps – what author Rory Stewart dubs songs-of-the-places-in-between.

Polynesians still sing and dance lineage and history. Indigenous North Americans too. And Sagas – Viking stories – were sung long before being written, memory aided through music, rhythm and rhyme. Only with the church did literacy become common – transcription and illumination the domain of monks, no doubt a pleasant alternative to matins, tonsure-grooming and pretending to not masturbate.

In-keeping with songlines and mapping tunes, music permeates *this* geography, a flow like magma. The Portuguese lute – cousin to the Scandinavian lyre – was the first European instrument brought here, morphing into ukuleles and slack-key guitar, the sound still prevalent. Most pop music, in fact, has island roots. Without Hawaii there would be no blues or country music, no amplified guitars. Western hemisphere radio stations would, in all likelihood, play nothing but derivations of Austrian symphony with German orchestration. Hendrix probably would’ve stuck with violin, and played it right side up. Even breezes through palm fronds sound lyrical – secret-sharing, melding days like ravens blurring time.

It’s nighttime on Hawaii’s Big Island and we’re strolling under snowflakes – bursts of white light, falling in twinkles – winter decoration strung from trees. Palms are wrapped in Christmassy bands of red and white, a monolithic candy cane forest. (“And then we walked through the Lincoln Tunnel.”) A full moon dances over the fronds, lighting our way in a weirdly muted glow, an inverted world compared to the nearby resort, where everything’s lit from below. In the morning that same fat moon sets in predawn amber, deepening to Orbit orange and pomegranate, the stuff

of sailors' warnings and battle calls in the ancient Orient. The moon's managed to mimic sunset – identical colours, cold dead rock the colour of fresh lava.

Following a rainfall we take a leisurely drive toward Waimea and stop the car where two blistering rainbows arc alongside the road at the base of a steep green hill. There's a thin band of watery cloud, then a rainbow, and another multi-hued sash below, hanging at eye level a hundred meters away, the brightness overwhelming. Tears gush from our eyes – maybe the vibrancy, maybe emotion. Deb approaches the pulsing glow, takes a photo, then returns to the car, and in a soft voice says, "A lot of spirits in there."

Back at our accommodation I'm grilling dinner, socializing with locals at the barbecue pit, joking about haoles and the newest addition to their family, a baby boy born in Montreal.

"Like you," they say to me. "White."

"Don't hold that against him," I say.

"No, no," someone says.

"It's okay," the patriarch says, "he's brown on the inside."

We smile and nod.

The man's daughter, the newborn's aunt (tutu), proffers a bucket of crab dip with an open bag of Doritos Scoops, and I tuck in.

"Poor man's dip," her dad says. Maybe because it's pollock-fish, maybe just because. "My boy," he adds, indicating the newborn's dad in a photo, "he's a good looking boy, like his sister." He nods at the sweet woman smiling and feeding me and I nod consent.

She sets down the dip, finds a video on her phone, and presses it to my ear. "Listen," she says, smiling. It's her new nephew being coached by his dad, her brother.

"Say, 'Hi Auntie. Hi Auntie. Hi Auntie.'" The tiny boy gurgles something I can't make out.

She giggles. "Hear it?" she asks. "He's already got a French accent."

She makes me listen some more. I want to hear it, but can't, so pretend I do with a suitable sound. We laugh.

They tease me that I've brought along two beer (Icelandic single serve). I explain it's either to make a friend or enjoy myself, no downside. Then I offer the beer.

"Thanks," they say, but decline.

"See?" I say. "No downside."

They laugh. I drink my two beer and grill ono and corn. As sun descends, birds explode in riotous birdsong. When it vanishes, the silence is instantaneous – a switch turned off. There's a Northern Cardinal sitting quietly in a tree, looking like a festive ornament, and a myna's perched on a railing, finally breaking the calm with clicks, pops and whirrs – the sounds we sung as kids in that old Christmas song. ("I never knew just what it was and I guess I never will.")

The following day I watch sunset too long and fumble about making dinner through a blue dot. We finish with fresh cacao beans from the farmers' market. The taste's like bitter chocolate, the seeds like Brazil nuts, plucked from thick peel. When my blue filter finally dissipates I go to the Lava Lava Club for a Longboard lager, primarily to say I've gone to the Lava Lava Club, which I imagine being run by Rick from *Magnum*, expanding his operations from the King Kamehameha Club. Next to me at the bar is a friendly guy from Southern California wearing an aloha shirt as vibrant as the Waimea rainbows. It's actually drowning out the stereo – Beach Boys if I'm not mistaken. ("Bermuda, Bahama …") We visit a while, marveling at the beauty of the islands, happy to be where we are. Then after a contemplative pause he adds, "But the more I travel, the more I appreciate where I live."

The Ocean Film Festival's underway and we go to see a documentary of *Hokule'a*, the double-hulled canoe circumnavigating the globe from Hawaii. It's sailed by a cosmopolitan crew of Polynesians and skippered by a young Hawaiian with the inherited ability, or gift, to navigate without instruments – nothing but sun and stars, intuition and belief. Navigators of this type have been studied extensively. They see the world differently,

like higher mathematicians. Their navigational world radiates out from themselves in a spherical, three-dimensional grid, and they're never lost. Locations simply lie on or off course, all within reach by adjustment, time, and the elements. It's a unique genius, something that can't be taught, only coached out of those who possess it, reminiscent of Viking sailors navigating by nature, intuition and fearlessness.

A *Hokule'a* crewmember's in the small theatre, answering questions following the film, speaking about patience and onboard communication, reminiscent of the Viking archaeologist's experience aboard *Sea Stallion*. The theatre lobby and concourse are a temporary exhibit, with photos and maps plotting the Polynesian ship's journey. Routes – yarn joining pins across the water – could be the paths of Captain Cook, ending where these began.

I spend time at the map. I've been here before, just as enraptured at a previous film fest, plotting trips taken and imagined, same as our map-art at home. My eyes trace the Pacific, trade winds and the Humboldt Current, what twentieth-century Viking Thor Heyerdahl used to sail west on a balsa raft, direction the same as Norwegian ancestors two hemispheres away. From an imagined side-street that led me here in the footsteps of Polynesians, this map's reconnecting me to the main road – my viking freeway. Now I'll follow Heyerdahl back to his seafaring home, where the Viking Age *really* began, before the shores of Lindisfarne, to the very start of Norse exploration.

Scandinavia

Borders? I have never seen one. But I have heard they exist in the minds of some people.

—Thor Heyerdahl

OSLO

Norway. Scandinavia's Wild West. One look at the landscape – mountains, fjords, paltry slivers of arable ground – it's no wonder exploration was essential. Going viking not only made sense but was wholly in character for the Norse, a nation of adventurers. Thor Heyerdahl crossed the Pacific in *Kon-Tiki*. Roald Amundsen, captain of *Fram* and *Gjøa*, not only discovered the Northwest Passage but was first to the North and South Poles. Not to mention Erik the Red, with his wife Thjodhildr and their children Leif, Thorvald, Thorstein and Freyis – explorers one and all. Mind you in Erik's case the choice was made for him – banishment for murder, first from Norway and then again from Iceland, equivalent to an eighteenth-century British prisoner being kicked out of Australia for bad behaviour. (For Thor's-sake Erik, stop killing your neighbours!)

I admit I can empathize with Erik, culling whatever neighbourhood he was in. For a time we lived next to a perpetual party house and the thought crossed my mind more than once. But I couldn't run the risk of being exiled to the Arctic (or Australia) so instead we moved. And when the neighbour's house was demolished as part of a property sale, I went back and smiled at the flattened building, imagining its former occupants crushed in the rubble.

Now, back to the Viking Age: Swedes are venturing across the Baltic into Asia, the Great Danish Army is permeating West Europe and East Anglia, and Norwegians are coming at the British Isles from every other direction. Circular North Atlantic currents will enable the Norse to find Iceland, Greenland and North America. While exploratory motivation amongst Scandinavians was similar, destinations varied. But as I learned

over too much coffee with the Viking archaeologist, tracking a nation's history is neither simple nor tidy. So with an academic's caution lingering, I'm taking care as we follow the trail here in Norway.

Landing in Oslo, once known as Christiania, we make our way to the city centre, which has, like Reykjavik, the feel of a large village. The countryside epitomizes rugged beauty – towering glaciers, deep inlets and the North Sea stretching toward the unknown – a tantalizing, icy blue welcome mat. Here in the capital we're in the southeast corner of the country, close to Sweden, at the mouth of a northbound fjord. We stay in the downtown core but everything's close to the water, fingers of inlet tickling wanderlust. A government building – a cylindrical structure of stone-brick like a castle – faces an urban park with a grass slope rising to the Royal Palace. The parkland is what remains of the King's hunting ground, once filled with elk and deer, busy with Royals, hart-hunting in the heart of town. In many ways a communal mindset remains, a socialist structure consistent with centuries of earldoms and a predominantly democratic society – a blend of Jarls, freemen and slave-thralls with greater gender equality than most Western societies would embrace for a millennium.

The Bygdøy Peninsula is our destination, a museum-crawl that combines a modest trek of hilly seaside with a trundle around the bay in a ferry that could pass for a small ark. I wouldn't be surprised to see Noah at the helm, although his beard might be red and plaited, no doubt muttering measurement-conversions into cubits. But today a flood isn't imminent and the animals on our little vessel are simply a mish-mash of international tourists. We haven't yet creolized, however, and conversation around the boat's a Babelesque buzz over the cough and spit of a disgruntled engine.

We've had a hearty smorgasbord breakfast – a distinctly European layout of charcuterie with fruit and muesli, and I tried fermented Norse cheese the colour of seasoned oak, the taste one of the strongest I've experienced. It reminded me of Neil Oliver conducting his own Viking food tour and munching something particularly gnarly – wind-cured crotch bits sawn from some unsuspecting animal – what he called a "challenging flavour." My curiosity was satisfied with the first nibble of

leathery brown cheese, which may have permanently killed my taste buds. I hid the rest.

Now we're pulling away from the dock with a view of the Opera House, steep craggy shores stretching in every direction. Each Scandinavian country – low-lying Denmark, populous Sweden, rugged Norway – seems defined by coastline and islands, a frontiersmen mindset, independence and ingenuity inherent traits. Norse roots go back in this vein a very long time. Around 4000 BC, with thinning forests and rising sea levels, nomads were settling and taking to agriculture. Crops created surplus, populations grew, trade ensued, and with it the emergence of wealthy, powerful groups. Tools and weapons shifted from stone to bronze to iron, and art kept pace, reflecting an expanding world. Commonalities remained, however, with a seemingly timeless pull to the sea. Nearby cave drawings from 3500 years ago clearly show longships – perhaps the earliest dragon boats – serpent-prowed vessels that defined a people.

Let's jump back to the Pacific for a moment, to a Vancouver rhib tour around Burrard Inlet, English Bay and False Creek. One of our small group of travellers was a woman from Bergen – on Norway's west coast – starting point for the Lindisfarne raid. This lady's relatives, five dozen generations earlier, kicked off the Viking Age.

As our rubber-hulled boat approached Kits Point we came to the *Munin*, replica of the Viking ship *Gokstad*. I could feel the Norns at play – Urðr, Verðandi, and Skuldor, mythical weavers of destiny. I had a chance to climb aboard the longship and time bent like its clinker-built planks, twisting with each wave. Bound by a mooring line, the *Munin* felt bridled, neither stilled nor silenced, only shushed. Her exterior was dark, layered in pitch and sealant, while inside was the weathered look of oak cabinetry (and fermented cheese). Bright painted shields adorned gunwales like fierce nautical flags while the sail – a faded crimson square of coarse cotton – was hoisted into place with mismatched rope. Oarlocks gaped, yawning little mouths bored with immobility. She wasn't set to sail, only on display as part of a wooden boat festival. When I tracked her down once more she was retired, laid to rest at a Scandinavian Centre on a treed hill far from the sea. I was there for a celebration of life – a good friend's mother, commemorated in the same space as the *Munin*. And I said goodbye to both.

I wanted to share this with my new Nordic friend in the rhib, the tapestry of our saga. The *Munin* was named after one of Odin's two ravens that brought him news from abroad, the word itself meaning Memory. I wanted to explain it all. But instead I left the talking to our skipper, who reminded me of Kramer, giving his New York City tour on *Seinfeld* in a horse-drawn carriage, making up stuff as they went, or his autobiographical bus tour – The Real J. Peterman Tour – sharing things of such little interest it's hysterical. So I contained myself and left the "informative" talk to the likable captain-guide who knew nothing of the city.

Of more interest to me was the fact my seatmate shared her home with what may be the oldest Viking, from the time of the Lindisfarne and Iona raids. Just south of Bergen, at Grønhaug on the island of Avaldsnes, skeletal remains and boat burials have been recovered from the late eighth century. It's the same area that yielded the *Oseberg*, arguably the most spectacular Viking ship. Utilizing dendrochronology (counting growth-rings in wood), ships can be accurately dated, while the wood can determine place of origin – in these cases, oak from Norway's southwest. The woman from Bergen could've hitched a ride home in my mental leap-frog, returning to Norway in Heyerdahl's footsteps.

Which is where we are once more, or still. Back on our ark-like ferry, downtown Oslo shrinking behind us while a swath of museums lies ahead. Amundsen's ships are here – *Fram* and *Gjøa*, the latter a *real* ark with high rounded bow designed for ice-filled seas. Heyerdahl's boats are close by – *Kon-Tiki*, the raft he captained from Peru to Polynesia, paralleling what the *Hokule'a* is currently doing. As well as *Ra II*, a papyrus reed boat he sailed from Morocco to Barbados, each brash undertaking turning accepted anthropology on its head.

Late in life Heyerdahl continued to lecture and conduct archaeological work on what's been called The Search for Odin, incorporating Azerbaijani rock carvings from 8000–7000 BC. The style of art, he insists, is the same as that found in Norway – drawings of ships like those of proto-Vikings, "A simple sickle-shaped line, representing the base of the boat, with vertical lines on deck, illustrating crew or perhaps raised oars." This was part of a study on prehistoric Nordic Kings. Heyerdahl quotes Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglinga Saga*, stating, "Odin came to the North with

his people from a country called Aser." Always controversial, Heyerdahl viewed Sagas as history, contending Scandinavians came from the east, migrating north and west through Saxony and Denmark before crossing into Sweden. He claimed Aser was Azerbaijan, again citing Sturluson, placing the mythic locale, "east of the Caucasus mountains and the Black Sea."

"We are no longer talking about mythology," Heyerdahl contended, "but of the realities of geography and history."

Our ferry nestles into a jetty, we walk to the Maritime Museum, and then on to Oslo's Viking Ship Museum, where things come together, a busy intersection on my viking thoroughfare. From the *Munin* – half a world away – we're now at the original, unearthed at a boat burial just south of us in Gokstad. Constructed late in the ninth century of clinker-built oak, the *Gokstad* was designed for warfare and trade. Harald Fairhair was King of Norway. It was a time of Norse prosperity. Vikings ruled Dublin and York. And here, the *Gokstad* was laid to rest in a massive burial mound, interred with three other boats. Grave robbers removed treasure and arms long ago but the ships remained, sturdy and symbolic.

From the *Gokstad* we move on to the *Oseberg*, like moving down the buffet from starters to mains. This too was found in a burial mound, just south of us near Tønsberg – the oldest Viking boat to be discovered aside from those currently being excavated in Estonia. Remarkably, the *Oseberg* was found in pristine condition with grave goods and two bodies. The funeral and boat burial took place in 834. Physically, the *Oseberg* is exquisite, crafted for beauty more than seaworthiness, carved with sea serpents and dragons slithering up a steep rising prow – craftsmanship for the afterlife. It's as significant a find, perhaps, as the treasure from Helgö.

The *Oseberg* burial included the two women we're familiar with, old and young, the woman from Persia. Debate remains as to the elder's identity, the woman presumed of high rank. She may have been Yngling Queen Åsa, King Harald Fairhair's grandmother. Tests suggest they lived at the same time and place. Other theorists believe the woman was a seer, another interesting notion to warrant such an esteemed funeral. DNA traces remain insufficient to prove bloodlines or whether the two women were related.

Unlike the pilfered *Gokstad*, a wealth of valuables was found on the *Oseberg*: richly decorated sleighs, a wheeled cart, bedposts, wooden chests and the fascinating Buddha-bøtte or Buddha-bucket – a wood, brass and enamel pail, the handle of which is decorated with cross-legged, Buddha-like figures. The bucket's made of yew wood and secured with brass strips. The handle's held into place by two identical figures of a seated man in the Lotus position. The eyes are closed, expressions peaceful and Zen-like. There are decorations in red and yellow enamel, and within the enamel are four swastikas – Buddhist symbols representing success and good fortune. Bringing to mind the bronze Buddha from Helgö – whether acquired from trade, theft, or gifted from travelling monks, we'll never know. Household goods, farm tools and luxury items were also buried with the Buddha-bucket: wool garments decorated in silk and finely crafted tapestries, some of the few surviving examples of fabric and textiles from the Viking Age.

With this sumptuous archaeological stop in Oslo another pin's thrust in the map, as though I've strung yarn from the *Hokule'a* exhibit halfway around the world. The brown cheese still lingers on my palate but the rest of this I'll happily savour. I imagine stage lights dimming – new acts and characters shifting from Norse to Dane, as our trail's leading us south to the Jutland Peninsula, where the Danelaw began.

COPENHAGEN

There's a Danish word – hygge, as hard to define as pronounce. The feeling of homeyness. Invariably it's associated with warmth – sanctuary from the depths of long winters. What I imagine a clan feast in a Viking longhouse to be – a sense of family, contentment akin to home for the holidays. Here in Copenhagen I hope to experience it, a little holiday hygge.

Our exploration starts at Copenhagen's National Museum, in a Prehistory Exhibit stretching into the Viking Age. From Bronze Age relics it's clear the Danish experience was more forgiving than that of other Scandinavians, the Jutland Peninsula offering better farming and opportunities for wealth, the impetus that drove Norsemen and Swedes further afield.

We learn of Egtved Girl, a Bronze Age woman in her late teens, discovered near the village of Egtved. Buried in a coffin in a boggy barrow, her remains are remarkably well-preserved. Dendrochronology dates her funeral at 1370 BC. We know her height and weight, the colour and style of her hair. She had neatly trimmed nails. With her are the remains of a cremated child, age five or six. Heartbreakingly real. I focus on the history, the science of it all, in an attempt to quell the human element. It doesn't work.

The girl's coffin was excavated in the 1920s, buried in an east-west alignment – a Christian burial – body on its back, head to the west, allowing the deceased to rise facing Christ on Judgment Day. The fact Egtved Girl is buried in this manner, fourteen centuries before Jesus was around for the first time, gives pause. Perhaps, like Christmas and the cross, modifying tradition to keep pace with changing times.

Egtved Girl's clothing and jewellery are easily identifiable: a loose, short-sleeved blouse, a short skirt, wool belt, bracelets in bronze, and a birch-bark box containing pins, an awl and a hair net. Cowhide lined the coffin and she was covered in a blanket with flowering yarrow on top. From the flowers we know the funeral took place in the summer. She was buried with a container of beer, made from honey and wheat, myrtle and cowberries. Further analysis tells us she came from the Black Forest, meaning she was well-travelled. Which I like, knowing this woman was a voyager – a cosmopolitan Saxon who made her way a thousand kilometers north when most of the world never ventured more than a few miles from where they were born. Or maybe I just want to believe her short life was full.

The Trundholm Sun Chariot's on display, crafted around the time Egtved Girl was a child in southern Germany. This Bronze Age piece was discovered early last century when a boggy chunk of northern Zealand, just west of us, was ploughed for the first time. It's a bronze statue of a horse pulling the sun – about two feet long and a foot high. Although one solid piece, horse and sun are on wheels, indicating motion. It still shines like polished gold, and could pass for Helios the Greek Sun God, or Sol, his Roman counterpart. Remarkably, sol – the Roman word for sun – is identical in Old Norse. Now consider the fact this bronze Nordic Sun Chariot was forged seven hundred years *before* Hesiod or Homer wrote

the first known references to Greek gods. Again, who influenced who? Or whom? Another religious mystery supporting Heyerdahl's Odin search. Or perhaps another raven, glimpsing the world all at once.

Next I learn about the Hjortspring boat from 350 BC, constructed with symmetrical bow and stern for landing and launching in either direction. This is a beaching boat, designed for raiding, built and sailed a thousand years before the Viking Age. I read the following: "The Hjortspring boat is designed as a large canoe, excavated from a bog on the island of Als in southern Denmark. The vessel is wood, clinker-built, 18 meters in length, with space for a crew of twenty, who propelled the boat with paddles. This boat is the oldest wooden plank ship in Scandinavia and its closest parallels are the thousands of petroglyph images of Nordic Bronze Age ships. When found, it contained a great quantity of weapons and armour, including 131 shields of the Celtic type, 33 beautifully crafted shield-bosses (the convex metal centre of a shield), 138 spearheads of iron, 10 iron swords, and the remains of several mail coats. The sinking of the vessel has been interpreted as a deliberate votive offering."

The significance of this boat is that it matches rock-carvings from elsewhere, is double-ended, clinker-built and full of weapons. In other words, long before Scandinavian boat-builders developed the keel, Danes were still going viking – long-haul journeys in boats built for raiding – craft that could be dragged between inland waterways. The Hjortspring boat – this high-prowed, high-sterned war canoe, is the earliest dragon-boat longship.

Moving on, we come to the Hoby Chieftain's burial hoard, found just south of us in Lolland – solid silver cups made by Roman craftsmen in Greek design bearing images of Homer's *Iliad*. This treasure was already ancient when it changed hands a thousand years ago. Another link between Mediterranean civilizations and Scandinavian proto-Vikings.

I learn about Denmark's Jelling Stones. Having only read about them I mistakenly pronounced it like the national park where Yogi and Boo-Boo stole picnic baskets, until the Viking archaeologist corrected me.

"They're 'Yelling Stones,'" he said.

"Ah, thank you!" I hollered back with marvellous wit.

More research offered the following overview: “The Jelling Stones are two enormous carved rune stones from the tenth century, found at the Danish town of Jelling. The older of the two was raised by King Gorm, Harald Bluetooth’s father. The second, larger stone was raised by Harald himself when he was king, to celebrate his conquest of Denmark and Norway and converting Danes to Christianity. The inscriptions are considered the best known in Denmark and appear on national passports. The Stones represent Denmark’s transition from paganism to Christianity. Harald’s Stone, which features a depiction of Christ, is considered Denmark’s baptismal certificate, and is strongly identified with the creation of Denmark as a nation state.”

Like the wireless technology that bears his name, King Harald Bluetooth again proved his ability to bridge gaps and unite people, Christianity his political instrument, an institution rapidly dominating Europe. Converting his people not only avoided conflict with other Christian kingdoms but further strengthened his position on the throne, perpetuating divine right. I think of the Thor-and-Jesus door carving from Iceland’s National Museum. Here too it was understood that while Denmark was Christian, people practised whatever personal beliefs they held, pagan or otherwise, provided it be in private, a pragmatic social norm. And due west of us on Denmark’s North Sea coast, religious lines are again more dotted than solid at an archaeological dig currently under way in Ribe. It’s believed to be a Christian boat burial – possibly the first transitional grave, a hybrid of faiths. Burial with grave goods was distinctly pagan. But this unique Christian ceremony took place nearly two hundred years before the country’s conversion to Christianity. Once more lines blur. No different than Icelanders with their Hidden People. Why disbelieve anything? It could all be true.

ROSKILDE

It’s an overcast day, bright gray flattening the world. Everything resembles two-dimensional art. And we’re threading our way through a flow of cyclists in the pressed landscape to catch a westbound train to Roskilde. We’re going to the Vikingskipmuseet – the Viking Ship Museum, situated on a small island on the Roskilde Fjord. It’s where our Viking

archaeologist sailed aboard the *Sea Stallion*, setting of the film I watched looping on a museum TV.

The Roskilde facility's a working museum focusing on maritime and experimental archaeology. Walking from the train I hear the sounds of axe-blade on wood – chopping, shaving and splitting – the sounds that drew me to the carving shed on Haida Gwaii only louder, more construction than crafting. Men are hewing timber for new ships, splitting oak into planks. Other beams are being squared. Everything's done by hand – traditional boat building, forged iron tools cutting hand-felled trees – adzes and saws, awls and mauls. No costumed actor-guides here. This is a place of historians, anthropologists and archaeologists – hands-on researchers maintaining a culture. From nearby there's a soft *thunk-thunk* as an archer's loosed two arrows into a slab of oak. And a *clang-clang, clang-clang* rings from a metalworker pounding forged iron into nails. Clothing's current – Gore-Tex and technical fabric – but this is a place of the past.

Longboats are moored on the water, a fjord stretching out in choppy gray-green. Nine Viking boats have been excavated from the surrounding area. Another five – the museum's primary exhibit – were raised from the depths of the fjord where they were sunk in 1070 – a defensive maneuver to seal the narrows. It's these boats, pulled from the water, that grab me, on display in a glass-walled room overlooking the bay. Each ship's unique – warships and knorrs, designed for fighting, raiding, transport and commerce. The cargo knorrs are broad and deep, with greater storage for livestock and trade goods. Every craft used a combination of oars and single masts rigged with square sails of heavy cotton, coated in fat for weather-proofing and sewn into patchworks of woven squares, the familiar striped or checkerboard patterns with steer-boards toward the stern on the right-hand side, the origin of nautical starboard.

Behind the ships on a long high wall is a world map. Sweeping lines trace Viking exploration – where they came, went, raided and remained – red arrowed bands diverging into flanking lines, the look of a battle plan for world domination. "Sometimes the map *is* the territory." Then again, sometimes the territory's so expansive it can *only* be mapped, this display stretching imagination. The Roskilde facility's remarkable, the setting superb, but this map with its growing red lines is what resonates with

dreamy inspiration. In his book *On The Map* Simon Garfield writes, “It is one of the most appealing features of large maps, and world maps in particular, that all journeys are feasible.” Indeed.

STOCKHOLM

Our SAS jet rumbles down the runway, picking up speed. It’s smaller than most planes we’ve been on, milk-running our way around Scandinavia. I’d say puddle-jumping but sea-, ocean-, and fjord-jumping’s more accurate. We’ll cross Jutland’s sea-level sprawl and make our way up the crags of phallic-shaped Sweden, our destination just above the pee hole.

The instructional safety video on the overhead monitors is over in a moment – life vests under seats, the flight crew assuming we can figure out seat belts. Monitors rise then lower again – tidy rows in automated tandem like wing flaps, and on screen we watch the runway whiz beneath us. Wide painted lines race past like the world’s broadest passing lane. The plane’s equipped with external cameras – this one aiming straight down – and I gawp at the monitors as we lift off, ground dropping away like a glass elevator view, or in this case a fast-forward funicular motion. It’s one of the best rides ever – fairground exhilaration in a comfy seat with imported refreshments and blonde flight attendants. So much better than candy floss and carnies.

Our flight arcs over south Sweden, the Baltic turning north into the Gulf of Bothnia, which is fun to say as it sounds like Bosnia in a Catalan accent. The compact overhead screens, tucked up for the flight, flip down once more, exterior cameras showing us what’s up outside, or rather what’s down. The view’s a blue rush, clean sky and distant water, a wash of blue with fluffy breakers. Patches of white race past – smears of cloud in bite-sized crescents. It’s a view from a boat, only airborne, akin to the helm of a longship. I drift in imagined seascape. A shudder of turbulence rocks us like a wave and the fantasy’s remarkably real.

Our home for the week is an island – Skeppsholmen, one of fourteen linking the capital. Making our way to our accommodation and dropping bags, we stroll to Gamla Stan, the heart of Old Stockholm. It’s a pleasant day, woolly cloud dancing over sun. A massive red and white ship – Viking Line – turns in the water, narrow straits busy with maritime traffic. We pass Stockholm Palace, the imposing structure resembling a huge stiff

armchair, pulled around for a water view. Then we make our way to the Sweden Bookshop – not the erotica-filled shelves I expected but I stay anyway, finding a friendly staff member and asking for a recommendation, one title defining local culture for a space-restricted traveller. (No *Dragon Tatoo* stuff, thank you, the movie was disturbing enough.) The clerk gives my request some thought then tells me to read *The Long Ships*, the 1940s adventure novel by Frans Bengtsson.

Set in the late tenth century, the story follows Viking adventurer Red Orm – the Red Serpent. It ends up being a fine read. Some jokes fall short in translation but the book's entertaining, well-researched and it's been in the Swedish school curriculum forever, like Farley Mowat in Canada. Red denotes the protagonist's hair *and* temper – a stereotypical Viking, from Scania, or Skåne, on Sweden's south coast. The story's set in Harald Bluetooth's era, time of the Jelling Stones and Scandinavia's transition to Christianity, lingering paganism and the rise of Muslim–Spanish Moors moving north from Iberia. Bengtsson draws from Icelandic literature – Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* and medieval chronicles. Consistent with Sagas, the writing's archaic, straightforward verbs and nouns, minimal adjectives and adverbs. "Let their actions show what they feel," Bengtsson explains, describing his prose – traditional Scandinavian storytelling – lengthy tales, few words.

I browse some more, struck by a sense of being in the heart of the Viking world. In the same way standing stones mark Britain's past, here rock "boats" stand testament to seafaring history. South of us on the island of Gotland is the Ansarve Stone Ship from 1000 BC, a longship-shaped ring of stones – headstone-like rocks set in a pointed oval forty-five meters in length. And rock carvings from 1500 BC sit nearby, depicting Viking-style longships complete with dragonhead prows. Remains have also been unearthed of a clinker-built vessel without rivets or dowels, sewn together with rope. Constructed around 300 BC, sixty feet by nine, it was a rugged but seaworthy ship. When found, this early Iron Age longship was so heavily laden with armour and weaponry it could only be that of a raiding party – Vikings fighting at home long before setting out to conquer the world.

Helgö, Sweden's Holy Island, sits just west of here, home of the Helgö Treasure – the worldly hoard I saw on Vancouver Island. And directly

north of us lies Gamla Uppsala, one of Sweden's most sacred spots, site of burial mounds and interred kings like those in Kingley Vale, West Sussex. Gamla Uppsala was home to the mighty Yngling dynasty. (Not to be confused with Swedish heavy metal hero Yngwie Malmsteen – his dynasty rocks on!) But it was from here, Gamla Uppsala, that the Ynglings ruled Sweden. Descended from Frey, they're another reminder of royals embracing the notion of a divine bloodline. The *Ynglingatal* tells the clan's story, written around the eight century, the same time as *Beowulf*, in which Scylfings are referenced – Yngling kings from Uppsala. Once more tales blend legend and myth, the rich bouillabaisse of all history.

Gamla Uppsala was also where the Thing of All Swedes occurred – the general assembly or Althing, and a key place of worship. At the Temple of Uppsala, eleventh-century Saxon chronicler Adam of Bremen witnessed and wrote of Viking worship, sacrifice and bloodletting to appease the gods – Thor, Odin and Frey. Every nine years a nine-day ceremony took place here, sacrificing nine males of an array of species – dogs, horses, humans – all hung from trees around the temple. Each night another nine would die, until the final day when seventy-two corpses dangled, dripping blood onto holy ground.

NORTH, SOUTH, EAST AND WEST

Airborne again, Scandinavia behind us. Beneath the jet-stream, actual streams – veiny blue waterways the Swedes rowed and sailed from Europe to Asia. Saint Petersburg's northeast of us, where Rus Vikings reigned for ten centuries before Lenin's revolution – a millennium of Scandinavian-blooded Russian nobility and accumulated wealth. More Viking treasure, including coins from Baghdad and silk from China, has been found in Russia than all Western Europe.

Bearing south and west, we're now excitedly en route to every traveller's dream destination – fabulous Belgium! Yes, the titillation of NATO and the European Union. I kid, of course. Our friends Wade and Jan will be hosting us as they've generously done for years. Touching down in Brussels we carry on to Leuven, where we find a Viking past once more.

Just over the German border is Aachen, home to Frankish King Charlemagne, who reigned in the late eighth and early ninth centuries. In Charlemagne's court was a monk named Alkuin. Alkuin, who hailed from York, was friends with Biutta, a survivor of the Viking raid at Lindisfarne. Alkuin and Biutta's correspondence offers insight to that summer's day in 793, their letters also contributing to the writings of another monk – Symeon, who in the twelfth century penned, or quilled, the *History of the Church of Durham*. Symeon describes the Viking attack: "On the seventh of the ides of June, they reached the church of Lindisfarne, and there they miserably ravaged and pillaged everything; they trod the holy things under their polluted feet, they dug down the altars, and plundered all the treasures of the church. Some of the brethren they slew, some they carried off with them in chains, the greater number they stripped naked, insulted, and cast out of doors, and some they drowned in the sea."

While the Viking Age may have started at Lindisfarne, it was recorded here. Symeon's report, gleaned from Biutta and Alkuin, adds tangibility to that day on Northumbria's Holy Island. Gone are the questionable references to flying dragons from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Mind you, that may be how dragon-prow ships appear in the haar. Again, we pick through conjecture for a sense of what actually transpired. And, it would seem, history's not always written by the victors.

As the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was being scribed in Wessex, Western Europe's history was being recorded here by Germanic rulers in the *Annals of Fulda*. These accounts describe Viking fortifications where we are now on Leuven's Dyle River. This was a Viking long-port, a place to winter longboats – dry-docks for storage and repair. Now, the Dyle, or Dijle, is a series of canals that link this interior town to the Rupel and Scheldt, flowing through Antwerp to the Channel and North Sea. These Vikings were likely riverborne Danes, like their Swedish counterparts, extending raid and trade routes across Europe – long-ports indicating a shift from infiltration to semi-permanence. Realizing this site's significance – a canal we've walked and run alongside a dozen times or more – is like finding a lost puzzle piece I never knew was missing.

My path's now feeling well-worn, like favourite jeans in need of mending, or discarding. But like my comfiest denims I have no desire to abandon my trail. Too many loose ends and curving roads remain. So I'm

doing some sewing, akin to the Spirit Trail, truncated bits that ultimately create a contiguous path. In this vein my travels to Turkey, Italy, France and Spain provide key Viking milestones but I’m merging recollections into a subjective mosaic, recording history in the manner of Symeon and Charlemagne’s scribes. These Mediterranean excursions occur over different years, but the heart of my viking experience – my open-ended wanderjahre – remains. A ravenesque blurring of time perhaps, some stitching and a patch or two, and we carry on, the result as enduring as soft old jeans.

Mediterranean

Halfdan carved these runes.

—The Halfdan Inscription, Istanbul

TURKEY

We're aboard a ship – a big white whale I've dubbed Dick, for obvious reasons. Yes, I'm currently reading Melville. We've been cutting a wide wake – frothy white on topaz, south on the Adriatic and Ionian into the Mediterranean and then sailing north, picking our way through Aegean islands. Ahead is the Sea of Marmara and Istanbul – what remains of the Turkish Empire, just southwest of the Black Sea. Kusadasi is our port of entry to the crumbling city of Ephesus. We're spanning two worlds – Europe and Asia, Christian and Muslim – in a secular country where buzzing bars compete with the echo of muezzins, warbling calls emanating from everywhere and nowhere. As Rebecca Solnit writes, "Chants are sometimes sweetest when you don't know where they're coming from."

I'm thinking of the Lewis Chessmen. Again. The game from the Near East, what became the Ottoman Empire, home of The Great City – Byzantium, Constantinople, Istanbul. To Scandinavians it was Miklagard. And in the mid-ninth century Swedish Vikings arrived, navigating waterways into the Bosphorus. These were the Rus – rowers, their name given to the land they eventually ruled – Russia. While Danes descended on England and Norse raided the North Atlantic, Swedes were sailing the Baltic and plying East Europe's rivers to here, the Golden Horn of Miklagard – by all accounts the grandest city in the world.

But the great walled city proved impregnable, its wealth beyond Viking reach. Byzantines thwarted Swedish Rus Viking attacks with a lethal weapon known as Greek-Fire, an incendiary chemical compound. The exact makeup of Greek- or Sea-Fire was never learned outside the Byzantine Empire. Shot from powerful nozzles like firehoses, the flaming liquid burned on water and stuck to what it hit – the equivalent of anti-

tank guns to pitch-soaked longboats. I shudder to think of the wrath of Greek-Fire, and suspect I suffered a mild version following a kebab in Corfu.

By the 870s Vikings arrived in number, and ibn Fadlan writes of Rus armadas in the Caspian in 910, 912 and 943. Integration was rapid – not the gradual raiding, settling, ruling pattern of Danes and Norse in the British Isles. Here, Scandinavian Rus were recruited, and soon made up the elite Varangian Guard – personal bodyguards of the Byzantine Emperors, a ninth-century version of Swiss Guards – loyal, battle-seasoned warriors, but with more hair and less comical attire. This lucrative, noble work appealed to most Vikings. Maybe the climate helped. They came in droves. By the end of the eleventh century so many Swedes enlisted in the Varangian Guard that back in their homeland laws were passed to curb Scandinavian emigration, denying Swedes the ability to inherit while they were in the Byzantine Empire. Turkey was the Viking centre of Asia, and Northmen were in demand.

This is also the home of Hagia Sophia – a Christian basilica for a thousand years and Muslim mosque for five-hundred more. The mammoth building, statement of power and advanced engineering, was already old when the first Vikings arrived. Its significance to our journey's not only the Viking Royal Guard but a recent discovery of what's known as the Halfdan Inscription – hand-carved runes from a time when Scandinavian writing was rare. Viking history, lineage and law were memorized and recited orally. Nordic runes are a special find. Though faded and somewhat open to interpretation, experts agree this runic carving in a marble parapet on the mosque's top floor says something like, "Halfdan carved these runes." Quite simply it's Viking graffiti, or in fact a graffito.

Runes are straight, stick-like lines, some angled, easy for carving into stone, bone or wood. But even runic lettering was loosely based, used differently by different writers. Most often Viking runes shared something as simple as the Halfdan Inscription here in Istanbul, or another found in an Orcadian burial tomb that reads, "Hrothgar lay with Bjornsdottir," in other words sentiments as mundane as, "Kilroy was here," or, "You'll never guess who Kilroy shagged."

The simple written language of straight and angled lines is actually very close to a code that high-school classmates of mine came up with, quite

cleverly, to cheat on a provincial exam they'd managed to steal along with the answer key. Having had the answers to the multiple choice exam in advance, the guys ingeniously carved pencils with sequential lines, representing A, B, C, D (all of the above), or E (none of the above). At a glance, the carved answer-key pencil runes simply made the writing instruments look old or beat-up, as though they'd been aggressively chewed by a nervous beaver working on a tiny graphite-lined dam. Answer-key pencils were available for sale and sold like illicit hotcakes. For most it was their only college-required course, one good grade a fast-track to post-secondary.

Things went smoothly for the young entrepreneurs. The scheme was rolled out across British Columbia and that year jocks and remedial students magically pulled up the province-wide grade curve. This is entirely true. But of course it was discovered. The scope of the plan was simply too great, and like American investment banks, the boys learned there's no such thing as "too big to fail." So we all had to rewrite the exam, after most of us should've been well into summer vacation. Of course if the rune-carving cheaters had put a fraction of the time into studying that they had into encrypting, carving, pencil distribution and sales, they'd almost certainly have passed the exam. Mind you, there's no money to be made in applying oneself at school. At least not that I know of.

And like those athletically proficient, scholastically challenged young men I went to school with in the mid-1980s, Vikings weren't particularly big on reading or writing either. Just the occasional sprinkling of rune carvings like those in Orkney and Istanbul. But despite Vikings leaving next to no writing, their descendants became and continue to be prolific writers – tomes of law and legend like the *Books of Icelanders* and *Settlements* we viewed in Reykjavik, the biblical *Prose Edda*, and literary Nobel Prize winners. In fact, Iceland currently has more authors and published books per capita than anywhere.

TUSCANY

Now. Allow me to introduce Ragnar Lothbrok, a Danish Viking who conquered Paris in 845, his army smashing the fortress in the Seine like a piñata bursting with churchy riches. Ragnar's sons carried on the tradition,

creating their own legacies. Ivar the Boneless was one – leader of the Great Army and ruler of York. There was Halfdan and Hastein as well as Björn Ironside, his exploits as far-reaching as the Rus. While Ivar's power grew in Danelaw Britain, Björn ventured south to the Iberian Peninsula and beyond, plunging Northmen into the Mediterranean.

In 860, along with his brother Hastein, Björn passed the Pillars of Hercules, rounding Gibraltar and leaving a wake of pillage from the Spanish Costa del Sol to the Côte d'Azur, where he wintered their growing fleet in the French Riviera. Already an influential naval commander, Björn led ongoing raids into the Mediterranean, his longships bulging with booty. From southern France the Lothbroks went to Italy, capturing the port of Pisa and establishing a Viking presence in Toscana. This is all documented, recorded by Dudo the Norman, angelic monk from Saint-Quentin, not to be confused with Angel from San Quentin in *The Rockford Files*.

Dudo's account describes Björn's fleet moving up the Arno from Pisa to the foothills of Florence. But in a miscalculation similar to Bugs Bunny missing that turn at Albuquerque, Björn and Hastein, intending to go to Rome, instead hung a left when right would've been, well, right. And while they missed out on the Holy City's accumulation of previously stolen goods by a comparatively short distance, they *were* able to enjoy the beauty of the Tuscan hills, something we too are travelling a great distance to experience.

The Lothbroks continued their raids north and east, eventually reaching Luni, just outside Venice. Held at bay by Luni's town walls, the cunning brothers chose instead to play the Christian compassion card. What Bjorn and Hastein lacked in geographical knowledge and sense of direction they more than made up for in play-acting and subterfuge. Hastein sent word to Luni's bishop he was gravely ill, wished to convert to Christianity, and so be laid to rest in consecrated church ground. The bishop complied, no doubt imagining an opportunity to chalk up a high-profile W for his conversion stats rather than seeing the inherent risk in negotiating with terrorists.

Hastein was brought to the chapel with his small honour guard and once inside the church, leapt from his stretcher, not only healthy but heavily armed. (So much for the bishop's win-loss record.) Hastein's less-than-

honourable honour guard joined the fray, butchering their way back to the gates where they let in the rest of the Lothbrok army, providing the Vikings another inland stronghold. From here they conducted further raids around Italy and North Africa, their growing army now composed of Scandinavian recruits, Anglo-Danish and Varangian mercenaries. Rune stones still stand in Sweden commemorating fallen warriors from Norse Langbarðaland – Italy, land of the Lombards.

But the wave of Lothbrok victories was doused, in a manner, as the brothers made their way home. By this time the Muslim Saracen navy of Al-Andalus – Spain and Portugal – had developed their own version of Greek-Fire and were ready and waiting for Björn and Hastein as they left the Mediterranean. A violent and bloody battle took place in the Straits of Gibraltar with the loss of forty Viking ships, destroyed by fireball-hurling catapults. The Lothbrok brothers managed to escape, however, with more than half their fleet, returning to their homeland with substantial wealth and military strength, where they assumed even greater positions of power. Björn went on to rule Sweden from Uppsala with enough glory to keep bards song-writing for years, awaiting his seat at the feasting tables of Valhalla.

Now we too are en route to Viking Langbarðaland, retracing Björn's oar-strokes from the Arno to the hills of Florence. We left Vancouver under ashen sky, a band of late afternoon sun hugging the horizon. Fallen rain clung to Tarmac in greasy pools. Gradually cloud shifted to fluffy gray and rose from the sea, widening the band of light. Following a long and forgettable flight we passed briefly and efficiently through Munich in rain, providing sufficient time to soak us and our luggage while we queued at truck-mounted airstairs, awaiting a Dolomiti plane to Florence.

Octoberfest is underway and we're served Bavarian strudel by an Italian flight attendant as we fly through towers of cumulus into clearing skies. Italy appears cheerful and welcoming as we descend in brilliant sunlight. In *The Reluctant Tuscan*, Phil Doran writes, "I think no country on earth benefits from the sunshine more than Italy. When it's overcast and dreary, the gray seems to accentuate how everything is slightly threadbare and the villages have an almost shabby, Eastern European feel. But when the sun shines, the ordinary becomes remarkable and the remarkable becomes transcendent."

Sure enough, Brunelleschi's towering red tile Duomo is aglow, standing at attention as we land. Rolling to the terminal, I recap my three Italian lessons which have equipped me to exchange friendly salutations, order a glass of water or bottle of red wine and get the bill, provided I'm speaking to a woman named Claudia or a man named Marco. (*E lui è Marco? Si, è Marco*.) We arranged for a driver to greet us but don't know who that is. When we figure it out I'm pleased to learn his name is *actually* Marco, enabling me to extend a friendly salutation before telling him I would like a glass of water, a bottle of red wine and the bill.

What follows is a careening drive and near miss at a clustered, merging intersection. With a slam of brakes and explosion of horns we continue weaving through the city, crossing Ponte San Niccolo to our apartment on the south side of town. It's late and we're exhausted but manage to stagger to a small trattoria with a wood-fire oven and with our smattering of Italian order an asporto (takeaway) of salamino piccante pizza, calzone napoletano, tagliatelle alla boscaiola, and insalata verte which we enjoy in our unit with Chianti before dozing off into small increments of deep, jetlagged sleep.

A cloudless sky, sunshine and early autumn heat greet us when we wake. With restorative cups of strong Nespresso we ravage leftover pizza and calzone before heading out to explore. Making our way into town we cross the Arno on the Ponte Grazie. A solitary rower glides by on calm green water, oarlock squeaks the sound of honking geese. What follows is a day of neck-craning views of cathedrals and statues in marble – pink, green and alabaster, high loggias and fading egg-wash frescoes – the city blending ancient with new, displays of arrogance and commercial power. During the Renaissance trade fuelled new wealth, bringing with it the need to prove worth, not by birth but by accomplishment. Enter the House of Medici. Medieval nouveau riche, having afforded themselves a subtle distance from the church, commissioned artists with greater creative freedom and fresh interpretations of Biblical tales. As comic John Mulaney explains the Renaissance, "And then some Italian guy says, 'You mean I don't *have* to keep painting baby Jesus? I could paint *grapes*?!'"

From the city centre we stroll along the Arno, dodging flag- and umbrella-wielding guides leading sheep-like straggles of tourists. I can imagine Razz/Jazz here, having a heyday, rustling camera-toting gawkers

into a sorting wheel. I'd even help, pinning the odd laggard between my knees for a good shearing.

Back in our apartment – a couple of converted bedrooms from a once sprawling villa – I open shutters to a view of cypress-capped hills. Sfumato – smoky Tuscan mist – seeps over rolling landscape and the smell of olivewood-fire hangs with the mist. The dry earthiness of ponderosa wafts with the smoke and a thumbnail moon hangs like a boomerang on navy blue. Daylight dims, houselights come on, and we walk to dinner. The owner of our unit has arranged our reservation and entering the restaurant we're greeted like old friends. Over our meal we visit and share laughs with travellers from Dublin, due to fly home in a few hours. Unlike Viking forebears, they won't have to row.

Over the next few days we settle into a comfortable pace, cobbling bits of sleep with nighttime snacks and sleep-ins. Things we want to see and do, it seems, are all within comfortable walking distance – museums, architecture, shopping and picturesque cityscapes. We jog a series of hilly routes with tree-lined boulevards, and vistas from Piazzale Michelangelo leave us feeling we're in *A Room with a View*. We incorporate zucchini blossoms, truffles and salumi into more dishes than we can count, all paired with Sangiovese Chianti. Food's leisurely prepared in our unit along with some restaurant meals – aperitivos, antipastis, primis, secondis and dolces – fine food in modest portions, the makings of good living.

In the Leonardo Museum we marvel at da Vinci's genius – flying machines, siege engines and weapons of war, agricultural machinery, weather forecasters and underwater breathing apparatus – a medieval precursor to SCUBA. We gawk at Michelangelo's *David* at the Galleria dell'Accademia along with masterpieces on canvas at the Uffizi. Leonardo's *Ascension* captures Tuscan sfumato in a vanishing point through cypress, the visual identical to melded sea and sky. Down the endless hall I worm through a scrum of tourists to gaze at Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, the windblown redhead on a clam. In transit or newly emerged? A Renaissance spin, perhaps, on the Haida's *Raven and the First Men*.

We explore the many floors of Palazzo Davanzati, a grand city home with inner-wall water reservoirs and self-recycling drainage pipes – medieval construction with a water system present-day conservationists would envy. We wander looping paths through Giardini Bardini and

Boboli – terraces of manicured foliage both arid and lush, where a pool and amphitheatre face colossal Palazzo Pitti, its sloping courtyard a de facto community space. We shop in The Paperback Exchange, a venerable English bookshop, then spend time at the handmade paper producer Giulio Giannini. I buy a journal with a medieval map of Florence on the cover and realize with pleasure I'm able to find my way around using it, the streets unchanged since the Middle Ages. From here we meander through Mercato Centrale, a vast array of leather goods and warehouse of anything edible – meat, cheese and produce – a dizzying breadth of sights, sounds and smells. The seafood grabs my attention: countless fish, plump squid tubes and slithery heaps of purple octopi, knotted nests of plungers and beaks. At the butchers' stalls, wobbly slabs of folded tripe resemble fatty duvets with patchwork ventricles. The sprawl dances a line between inspiring and overwhelming. We take mental snapshots – memory fused with acerbic aroma – and make our way back.

Our friend Jan arrives from Belgium to spend the weekend and has arranged for a chef named Luciano to shop with us and cook a meal. He arrives at our apartment in chef's whites, a spherical whirlwind of enthusiasm, and makes his way to the kitchen, slowing to take it all in.

"Ees very nice. But too white. Too new!" he proclaims. "Come! We go to my place!"

So we pile into his old Alfa Romeo, currently parked halfway into traffic, blocking a lane. With threadbare seatbelts pulled tight, he wedges the car into Friday evening rush-hour, joining a stop-and-start flow of Vespas and vehicles, and we drive to a supermarket.

"Oh-kye-ah! What'choo feel like? What'choo wanna eat tonight?"

We collaboratively decide on a primi of spinach and ricotta ravioli which we'll make by hand, anchovy and burrata-stuffed zucchini blossoms, a secondi of duck with orange, and wine-poached pears with cream for dolche. For antipasti, hay-crusted pecorino with homemade fig jam.

At their home, a half-hour drive outside Florence, Luciano and his welcoming wife Mary – who doesn't speak English – move between the kitchen and a makeshift prep area at an adjacent table. Deb works on pasta

for the ravioli and I lean out a window with a glass of prosecco to watch a brilliant mezzaluna rise in an inky night sky. A solitary star hangs over the hills, gleaming like a penlight on a low, slow arc. I realize it's Venus and feel I'm witnessing her birth, a celestial Botticelli.

At ten PM we start cooking, or cuking as Luciano emailed previously in phonetic English. ("We will be cuking wath we buy at the market.") Venus has vanished, along with the prosecco. The temperature drops and suddenly it's very cold. Windows get closed, Chianti opened. With zucchini blossoms getting stuffed and fried in the kitchen, the adjacent room's become a pasta-rolling, ravioli-stuffing assembly line. Luciano breaks down the duck, burning off residual feathers on the gas hob, then uses a ceramic knife to draw and quarter the carcass. (Unlike the abbot in Reading, no hanging required.) Breast and leg portions are set aside while everything else – heart, liver, gizzard and lungs – go into a rich sauce with Italian Trinity (mirepoix) for the ravioli. As Luciano works, he teaches. We learn about Parmesan, reminding me of Martin Mull's master-of-disguise Gene Parmesan. Then we're shown how to properly cook duck.

"Cooking the duck, ees like sex-ah," he says, clutching his ample male bosom then running both hands sensuously down his thighs. "Fast with the breast, and slow with the legs. You understand, yes?"

We laugh and nod.

Sometime later a feast's on the table, everything delicious. Leftover pasta dough gets rolled with orange zest, folded and fried into a crispy dessert, dusted with sugar – an Italian beavertail or elephant ear. Which we crunch like cookies with the wine-poached pears and cream. Conversation is a seamless mix of English and Italian, speed varying based on who's talking. Communication's remarkably unaffected – everyone comprehends, despite not always knowing precise meanings. In the words of our Viking archaeologist, we've creolized.

Luciano shows me a collapsible fishing rod he ordered from China, a compact cylinder you clip in a shirt pocket like a pen.

"What do you fish for?" I ask.

"Ees trout, in the Arno, but up high, far away from Florence, you understand?"

"And what do you use for lures?"

“Ees food. Bait, yes?” he says, bringing a sealed tub from the kitchen to show me. Inside is a thick batter-like substance he’s made from breadcrumbs, cheese and crushed cookies soaked in Sambuca. It smells like boozy sweet sourdough. “Every cast, a fish!” he says, eyes sparkling.

I smile. Of *course* the chef makes his own fish bait. Michelin-star, no less.

At one AM, sleepy, stuffed and laden with leftovers and various jars – gifts from Luciano and Mary’s pantry – we pile back into the Alfa Romeo and wind through suburban countryside to Florence. A good night – a big night – our hosts providing dinner *and* a show.

Simple things feel adventurous when you don’t speak the language. And today we’re plunging headlong into adventure. Equipped with Google translate, Deb’s basic Italian and my willingness to fuck up, we’re off to experience the Florentine countryside from Firenze Santa Maria Novella, which despite its name is *not* a short story, but in fact Florence’s central station.

We split up, Deb to tackle an automated ticket kiosk, me to line up to speak to a guy who directs lined-up people into other lineups. I get into only one fight, which I feel’s quite good. The guy directing lined-up people into other lineups has my back, jumping in and giving the invasive bully a much better verbal drubbing than I was managing – having put on my angry face and raised my voice to tell the man in no uncertain terms that if he was Marco to get me a glass of water, a bottle of red wine and the bill! And with the line-cutting trouble-maker effectively sent on his way to question his existence, my new friend confirms that I should avoid the dizzying array of lineups and join Deb across the terminal at an automated kiosk, where we buy train tickets to Lucca.

We chose today based on the weather forecast, which shows sunny and fair all day, and made clothing choices accordingly, the conversation going something like this:

“I don’t wanna’ carry an umbrella.”

“Me neither.”

“Hands-free travel. *That’s* the way to go.”

“I agree.”

“We’re smart.”

“*So* smart!”

Now our train’s boarding. We validate tickets at a little machine like workers punching in, then find seats in the upper section of a two-level car. With a slight delay, our train departs. Apparently since Il Duce’s death (*that* was an exemplary hanging) prompt trains are no longer paramount. Then again, the whole timely train thing was probably fabricated all along.

We settle in to enjoy the hour-and-a-half journey west. Countryside slides past – hills peaked in stony forts resembling chunky brides and grooms on round green cakes. The rail line slices through treed slopes and communities strung together with the ring of an Italianate poem – Sesto Fiorentino, Prato Porta Serraglio, Pistoia, Montecatini, Pescia and Altopascio – before pulling into Lucca. The station’s plunked alongside towering brick wall that encircles the city in the shape of an imposing red apple. People walk, run and bike atop the fortification, the entire wall an elevated park, with treed pathways offering views of the city and undulating landscape beyond.

As we saunter from the station to access the wall via ramp and concrete stairs, we hear, and then feel, a boom of thunder that rolls like timpani drums. We exchange raised eyebrows and soldier on. In *A Little History of the World*, E. H. Gombrich describes the sensation: “Have you ever watched a storm approaching on a hot summer day? It’s especially spectacular in the mountains. At first there’s nothing to see, but you feel a sort of weariness that tells you something is in the air. Then you hear thunder – just a rumble here and there – you can’t quite tell where it is coming from. All of a sudden, the mountains seem strangely near. There isn’t a breath of wind, yet dense clouds pile up in the sky. And now the mountains have almost vanished behind a wall of haze. Clouds rush in from all sides, but still there’s no wind. There’s more thunder now, and everything around looks eerie and menacing. You wait and wait. And then suddenly, it erupts.”

Which is what we experience, the sky exploding, hurling down water. We’re in the heart of town, drenched, now searching for a place to wait

out the storm. But it’s mid-afternoon and everything’s closed. No longer feeling quite as smart without umbrellas, we scramble between awnings and loggias, each overhang shielding the occasional pedestrian and cyclist. Smiles and shrugs are exchanged. Eventually we give up and carry on in the downpour, stopping to take a photo of Deb laughing, arms outstretched, literally soaking it all in. Then we find a tiny osteria (open!) fronting a town square. The proprietor has a smattering of English and with smiles and pointing we get a platter of charcuterie, bread and cheese, and glasses of Chianti as we slither into chairs and drip.

After a while the storm moves on and sun beams down, the city steamy as wet laundry. Following coffee and cake we step around puddles and wander cobbled streets between cathedrals, passing one of the best buskers I’ve heard – a violinist in perfect acoustics under an arching loggia. A small group of us applaud and the musician’s taken aback by an enthusiastic crowd on a stormy Tuesday in October.

The train back to Florence finds us at the end of the workday commute – loud conversations on cell phones, workplace urgency and aggressive energy. People stink of BO and booze, garbage is dropped on the floor and a dog barks and jumps between seats, the ride intensely unpleasant. But outside vistas radiate in setting sun and a gibbous moon climbs into indigo. For the last few stops before Florence – a reversed reprise of the countryside poem – the train empties and becomes wonderfully silent.

For our walk home from the station we follow the Arno in nighttime calm. Dots of yellow light give surrounding hills the look of a stadium while streetlights reflect in the black of the river. A boat glides beneath a bridge, not rowed but paddled, the unmistakable outline of an outrigger. Which strikes me as out of place, for a moment, then fits perfectly as anything.

Another pleasant forecast prompts another daytrip. Once more we travel light, this time with umbrellas but light clothing given the warm outlook. Back in the centre of Florence we queue for a Rapido express bus to Siena. Departure times, once more, seem approximate. While waiting we visit with a pleasant couple from Virginia. If I were Theroux I’d assign

them made up names, Kenneth and Lilly-Anne Sturgess, perhaps. Swapping stories with the Sturgesses (Sturgi?) we hear of their adventures so far, crazy drivers the recurring theme. Eventually our Rapido arrives, crawling comically into the station. Unlike the comfortable train, the bus is aged and cramped. Views and roads heave with the terrain – nauseatingly so – and I swallow ginger tablets for impromptu elevensies.

Siena's history is similar to Florence's – wealthy medieval fort town, political and commercial powerhouse – evident in towering brick and marble architecture, vast town square and grand palazzos in a warren of steep cobble streets. Bunting and spinnakers hang in dense rows above walkways – orange, black and white – colours of the house of Lupo the She-Wolf, this year's victor of the Palio di Siena, the wild horserace that rumbles through the streets each year. Sportsmanship is theoretical – anything goes, and it's the horse that finishes first that wins, with or without its rider. With orange and black hanging from buildings, stanchions and flagpoles, it could be Halloween. But despite autumn décor it feels we've leapt directly to winter. Once more the weather forecast was a lie. Icy wind blasts through town, piercing our stupid light-weight clothing – conditions only combated with wood fires and whisky. Done with our frigid exploration of Siena we wait, shivering, for a bus back to Florence. Finally we board. Never has a hard, cramped seat with stifling engine heat felt so good.

SPAIN

The Norns, it would seem, have plans for us. Like Lewis Chessmen pawns, we've moved diagonally. To Spain. And we're here with a group. A lovely destination ruined by obligations of stuffy functions, formal attire and people you'd never choose to spend time with. I assume the entire group feels the same, so suffering at least is shared – unpleasantness amongst many somehow making it acceptable. Fortunately, we're able to break away – solo artists leaving the band – to explore south Spain and the Alboran Sea, where Björn Ironside and Hastein Lothbrok sailed on their epic tour.

From the ninth to twelfth centuries, Northmen or Normandos came to Spain, a Scandinavian presence growing here as it did across Europe. Northwest of us, where Spain and Portugal meet on the Atlantic coast, is

isolated Galicia, what became the religious outpost of the Santiago de Compostela in the ninth century. The *Annales Bertiniani* – Carolingian records written by Saint Bertin of France – tell of the first raid in 844 and how Galicia became a Viking stronghold, with archaeological evidence of long-ports. This jut of Iberian coast was a natural stop for raiders making their way down Atlantic France toward Lisbon and the Mediterranean. In addition to the attack of 844, Viking raids are documented from 859, 861 (in which the King of Pamplona was ransomed for sixty thousand gold pieces), 951, 964, and again in 1015 with a force led by Olaf Haraldsson, Norway's future King Olaf II.

Spain's experience was consistent with Viking patterns elsewhere – encroachment over ensuing years – a rash of raids, then ransom and tribute payments. More often than not weather was Spain's greatest defense. Storms, reefs and unfamiliar water destroyed scores of longships and needless to say, well-armed Vikings swim like anchors. And despite Rus Vikings dealing amenably with Muslims in East Europe, here in the West, forces clashed with Crusade intensity. Continentally speaking, Vikings and Moors fought on the left and traded on the right. But Ibn Fadlan notes even Eastern commerce would break out in violence.

Now on our own, we're heading out to explore south-central Spain, hopefully with minimal fighting. We have a friendly private guide and pleasant conditions, the sun a high slice of lemon. We start with a scenic walk through Ronda with its Moorish "Roman" Bridge and a view of Seville – also captured by Vikings in 844 along with Lisbon and the port of Cadiz. But as the Northmen advanced into the heart of Al-Andalus – Iberia's Islamic centre, the Muslim army engaged ferociously, pushing the Vikings back to their stronghold of Seville. Vikings only held Seville for a few weeks. Muslim soldiers arrived in force, pushing sixteen thousand Normandos from the city. The deciding battle occurred at a place called Moron (twin city, I presume, to Idiot.) Retreating Vikings ransomed hostages for food and clothing, then sailed off.

The Muslim scholar with the genealogically definitive name of Umar bin al-Hasan bin Ali bin Muhammad bin al-Jamil bin Farah bin Khalaf bin Qumis bin Mazlal bin Malal bin Badr bin Dihyah bin Farwah, more succinctly known as ibn Dihya (or Steve, as I like to think of him), wrote of the 844 Seville encounter, a defining moment for Vikings in the

Western Islamic world. According to ibn Dihya (Steve), following the eventual defeat of the Vikings in Seville, Arab diplomat Al-Ghazal travelled to Denmark to make peace with Danish King Horik I, an accord bridging geography north to south and religion east to west. But the groundbreaking accord was short-lived. Within a generation Hastein and Björn were here – ambitious and eager to impress papa Ragnar. Leading what began as a sixty-two ship fleet, they sacked Galicia, Portugal and Seville yet again, marauding their way to the Mediterranean.

Another fierce campaign took place when the Norman Jarl Gundraed attacked Galicia with a hundred ships and eight thousand warriors in 968, occupying Santiago de Compostela before being defeated by Count Gonzalo Sanchez in 971. Snorri Sturluson recounts Viking exploits here in *Heimskringla*, and commemorative rune stones in Scandinavia refer to men who fell in the Islamic world, broadly referred to as Serkland.

As hot sun gradually sinks, we're back where we started, our brief Iberian site-seeing checklist complete. Sufficiently suffonsified with local Viking lore (along with cava and tapas), we've ditched our group and fancy dress for good. Now, from south Spain we're moving on up. Not, as you might think, to a de-luxe apartment in the sky-hy-hy, but north, to France.

PARIS

As we cross Western Europe the Lothbrok family could very well be our guides, bringing us back to Paris. I've been a couple of times, staying in lower-numbered arrondissements as well as leafy green suburbs. Whether it's the passage of time, deteriorating brain cells or viewing the world like a raven, I find Paris mingling with Montreal. Place names overlap. There's an island in a river – Saint Lawrence or Seine, and a couple of Notre Dames. In Canada the French defended the city from English, while across the pond Parisians spent much of the ninth century defending their city from Northmen.

I find my notes and memories of being here as entertaining as Jerry Lewis. ("Hey laaay-dee!") That's to say, not at all. So I'll save you the tedium and instead share snippets from my carnet de voyage: CDG – Charles de Gaulle (rhymes with due for overhaul), Champs-Élysées (nice), Place de l'Étoile (busy), Eiffel Tower (steely), Louvre (too big), Mona

Lisa (too small), people (too French), cigarettes, neck scarves and dog shit (too much of), pastries (tasty). Throw in a Metro, muddy river, mild food poisoning, et voilà! (You really *must* go.) But the City of Light remains as integral to our saga as its enduring and inexplicable romantic mystique. So I'll reintroduce a Lothbrok to help navigate.

Viking raids in France, or Frankia, started in the late eighth century, soon after those in Britain – the same brief seasonal raids associated with the early Viking Age – no sieges, no settlements, no wintering. This changed by the middle of the ninth century, with two great assaults on Paris in 845 and 885 – flotillas of longships (in excess of a hundred ships) and thousands of warriors – diverse, united armies of Vikings. Same as in Britain, the raiding of monasteries continued along the French coast, but Paris remained the ultimate prize in these parts. Unlike Turkey and Spain, however, France had no Greek-Fire – just the river, high walls and faith in a Christian god for protection. Here, Viking assaults changed to sieges, lengthy campaigns with war-engines – catapults and heavy weaponry – warfare that continued into the Crusades with armies attacking castles and cities.

Ragnar Lothbrok's raid and capture of Paris in 845 happened on Easter, taking advantage of most Parisians being in church, unarmed. The successful sacking resulted in a huge Danegold payment to Ragnar by Emperor Charles the Bald – seven thousand pounds of silver and gold. In 885 a new generation of Vikings returned, trying once more to quash the city on the Seine, but failed with an uncharacteristic Parisian victory. Well, not so much a victory but the city didn't fall. Instead, Frankish Emperor Charles the Fat promised the Vikings tribute (bribe/ransom) and pointed them upriver to easy pickings in Burgundy, which in a clever two-birds-one-stone sort of way was currently revolting against the Emperor. (Well played, Charles.) It's worth noting that these Frankish King Charlies – the Bald and the Fat, are the offspring – grandson and great-grandson – of Charlemagne, part of the Carolingian Dynasty that ruled France, Germany and the Holy Roman Empire for more than a century, despite the Emperors' less-than-admirable monikers. But wait, it gets better.

The Paris sieges and raids in Frankia are milestones on our trail. For in much the same way Northumbrian England was given to Danes, so too the French found the most prudent way to avoid Viking attacks was to simply

grant land to those same Vikings and have them defend the very places they'd been fighting for. By the second half of the ninth century, Danes were wintering along the Seine and a Viking colony was established in southwest Gascony, near Spain. During this time Charles the Bald still did his political best to defend his Frankish empire, signing a treaty with a Breton King in alliance against the Vikings. But in the Charlemagne family's characteristically convoluted and self-serving way, Charles *also* allied with those same Vikings, creating French-sanctioned Northmen and paving the way for Rollo.

Let's jump to the tenth century, where the Carolingian Dynasty still rules Frankia with successive Charleses-in-charge. Or Charles' if you prefer. The Bald and the Fat have passed on. Now on the throne is Charles the Simple, Father to Charles the Fuckwit. (Okay, *that* one I made up. It was actually *John* the Fuckwit. Sorry, I made that up too.) But the Bald, the Fat and the Simple are quite true. Again, we have to assume Emperors didn't choose their handles. Regardless, *this* Charles – the Simple – tired of hemorrhaging Danegold, signs the Treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte to create Normandy – a Duchy for the Northmen, which is assumed by Rollo, a Norse noble, in exchange for servitude to the Charles du jour.

Rollo is baptised, becomes Robert, and vows to defend the Seine against his former Viking countrymen with an army of seasoned warriors from all over Scandinavia – Norse, Swedes and Danes, now melding with Frankian Saxons and Gauls, lineage and alliances as clear as the silty Seine. Rollo is now a Viking French lord with a new homeland and Europe is permanently changed. A few generations later these same Normans upend Western Europe once more when Rollo's great-great-great-grandson William follows in the family footsteps, mustering an armada and crossing the Channel. But this is no raid on England, it's a full-scale invasion, with William leading a diverse, seasoned army of Vikings. And this time, they're staying for good.

Norse UK

Afterwards they will find the Chessmen Marvelous and golden in the grass Just where the ancient gods Had dropped them.

—The Poetic Edda, *Völuspá*

DUBLIN

A full Irish starts my day. Guinness ends it. Both memorable, to a degree. The Norns have dropped us in Dublin. No pawnish move this time. More like a bishop, a decisive advance toward the king. Vikings founded this city in the ninth century. Its name, Dubh linn, means black pool, a reference to a dark tidal bulge where the Liffey meets the River Poddle, before flowing into the Irish Sea. With engineering and excavation this location became one of the biggest Viking long-ports and was the centre of trade for Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England – the hub of a Viking UK.

Trace a finger around Ireland on a map and at each good-sized river mouth you'll find a city. These places – Dublin, Waterford, Cork and Limerick, were Norse long-ports. This was a country of Vikings – landed immigrants no longer conducting seasonal sorties but evolving from raid camps to permanent settlements, capitalizing on fertile land and natural resources, not the least of which was a concentrated clump of good-looking Gaels.

Donna Heddle, director at the University of the Highlands and Islands' Centre for Nordic Studies, explains that this is the origin of Celtic redheads. Only in Ireland, Scotland and Wales do you find double-digit percentages of the population with red hair, a distinct Scandinavian genealogical trait. "Interestingly, if you look at where red hair occurs in the world," professor Heddle explains, "you can almost map it to Viking trading routes. The only other density of red hair which compares to Scotland and Ireland is in Scandinavia. It becomes a cultural marker of the Norse and of the Vikings."

Now, following a few days of dodging gingers in the capital, we have three more to see as much of the country as we can. The university town of Galway (home to PI tough guy Jack Taylor) and the black Cliffs of Moher draw us west to a stormy Atlantic – sea and land on the grandest scale. Armitage describes such a locale as having "opened its arms to the blast of the Atlantic, full of ghosts, legends, stories and poems." In the depth of that ocean blast we experience the maritime cliché of every season in a day – fat, swirling cloud, wind-rent and dark with rain, pierced by sundogs and splashes of radiant sun. Throw this tumultuous quilt over lush landscape, the result: hackneyed Irish rainbows and a palette of every green. It *does* feel magical, old land pervading the mind. As with Iceland's Huldufólk, here too I see the allure of archaic beliefs, luck and leprechauns. ("Teetilly-tee potatoes," indeed.) Toeing the line of a pagan past, the Celtic cross exemplifies shifting belief to faith, like Viking transitional art – Thor's hammer resembling a cross. Rebranding. Sure we'll try new Coke, just don't mess with the logo.

It was only a few years, barely a generation after the sack of Lindisfarne, that Vikings arrived here. There's record of raids on the Kerry coast in 812. These were the same Norse that pillaged Scotland and Northumbria. Settlement and commerce followed, centred in Dublin, with trade in steatite (soapstone), pottery, carved stag combs, walrus ivory, glass, jewellery and slaves. The supply of goods – thralls included – flowed in ever-increasing numbers. To this day Ireland's unearthed more Viking gold and silver than all of Britain.

Taking the reins from the Norns we're driving ourselves, skirting the southern half of Ireland between Norse towns consistent with our map-tacked yarn, our Irish slipstream resembling wonky compass points. When we veer north back to Dublin it'll form a pentagram. From County Kerry we drive south to Cork and northeast to Waterford – the crystal town. Just above us is Kilkenny, sitting atop Waterford like the head on its namesake cream ale. A friend named Ken said when he was here every reference to "Kilkenny" made him nervous. (He'd never seen *South Park*.) Now passing the long-port town of Limerick, I can't help myself:

There once was a Viking named Sven

Who rather than ladies liked men

When others would pillage

A wee highland village

Sven would go climb on a Ben

Knowing a Ben is a mountain makes it funny. And me clever. It may be worth noting I was similarly moved in Maui going through the town of Haiku.

Back home for a spell, I'm at one of Vancouver's first licensed movie theatres. Having driven the *Skyfall* landscape I now intend to see Bond re-kill the guy from *Django Unchained* – a good guy recast as bad, not unlike politics. I'm being helped at the theatre bar by two young servers – male and female, their accents so rich they have to be recent arrivals. He's Irish and she's Australian.

"Where's home for you?" I ask him.

"Ireland," he says.

"No shit," would be a suitable response but instead I say, "I mean, where exactly in Ireland?"

"Oh, a small town. Out on the west coast."

"Galway?"

A look of delight. "Yeah, Galway."

"Good university town," I say.

"It is. Have you been?"

"On our way to the cliffs, yes."

"Well how 'bout dat!" he says.

"And where exactly are *you* from?" I ask the second server, the Aussie, who's now joined the conversation.

"From Perth," she says. "Far from everywhere."

"It's a lovely city," I say.

"You've been to Perth?!" she says, surprised.

"My wife and I were there a few years ago," I smile back.

Of course they don't know if I've only left Canada twice; once to go to Galway and again to visit Perth, Australia. But I sound as though I'm well-travelled. Or lying. I figure the risk of sounding pompous is worth it to connect with strangers – make friends, shrink the world – what I consider global warming, in a good way.

YORK

I'm spinning somewhat, awaiting another fugue-like travel cycle: another airport – the heady aroma of duty-free perfume, another flight – prolonged boredom, bad food and second-hand fart. Following that, the actual travel, adapting and problem-solving – exhausting and invigorating in equal measure. But for now, I'm excited. Set to cross the pond once more, back on the viking trail – embroidering the tapestry of my saga.

The cautionary clang of a railway crossing and sound of a slow, screeching train is seeping through a window in our home along with the caw of crows. On the wall is the raven and boat, fused sea and sky, a framed view of the edge of the world. Explosive colour adorns a different wall, our map of the world – the territory, our exploratory playground.

In her *Pocket Atlas of Remote Islands* Judith Schalansky writes, "Consulting maps can diminish the wanderlust that they awaken, as the act of looking at them can replace the act of travel. But looking at maps is much more than an act of aesthetic replacement. Anyone who opens an atlas wants everything at once, without limits – the whole world. This longing will always be great, far greater than any satisfaction to be had by attaining what is desired. Give me an atlas over a guidebook any day. There is no more poetic book in the world." A traveller through and through, Schalansky understands the lure of the map, the flint to wanderlust's fuse. Now, with images of the world both real and imagined, I'm on my way. This time by air, rail and water to Britain's Viking capital of Jórvík – York, England.

It's pouring as I leave Vancouver. The weather forecast has precipitation at a hundred percent for the foreseeable future. Water splashes and bounces off raingear as I walk toward a seabus for a rocky ride across Burrard Inlet with a view through foggy windows of tanker-, container-, and cruise-ships. On the other side, walking to the airport train, a busker plays guitar, pan-flute and sings *Let it Be* in Spanish. The music, another

thread, as I'll skirt the home of those songwriters, passing Liverpool en route to Manchester before carrying on to York.

The train to YVR is pleasantly quiet as is the airport midday on a Saturday. At the gate I strike up conversation with a couple from Pickering, which is near my destination. He's carrying a Baby Taylor travel guitar, which makes us immediate friends. A mind-numbing flight ensues. Late afternoon departures do that, but cheese, beer and trashy movies make it bearable. My seatmates, left and right, are from the Lake District and Northumberland respectively. I'm given a list of places to go, none of which I want to see, so I smile, nod a great deal and pretend to take notes. Upon arrival at customs I make two more friends, a couple from Liverpool.

The open friendliness reminds me of an encounter at a North Vancouver pub where I met Norman the Welshman from New Zealand and his son Huw. Huw, a ski instructor in France, explained how the French say his name, pronouncing none of it, only making an oval shape with their mouth and exhaling a small puff of air. Between bouts of laughter we talked music.

"I played with Mickey Gee!" Norman said, beaming.

I wanted to look impressed but needed more to go on, which Norman read in my expression.

"He played guitar for Tom Jones! In his first band!"

"Ah!" I said, with suitable enthusiasm. Every Welshmen of a certain age has a personal Tom Jones story. Every one's true. But it's the random, archaic nature of the stories that make them superb.

After a stellar evening with my new Kiwi-Welsh-French friends, I woke with a hoppy head, a bar receipt for much less than I consumed and Norman's contact details, fearing I may've made commitments I can't or won't keep when sober. A couple of days later I was on our fifth floor balcony, barbequing, and beneath me Norman and family appeared, loading luggage into an airport-bound cab.

"Norman!" I hollered. "Up here!"

Seeing me, he smiled and waved. "Come to New Zealand!" he shouted. "Come and stay!"

Something about being on a balcony brought out an inner Juliet I never knew I had, to which I screamed, “I’ll never forget you Norman!” rending my shirt from my chest. Not that the screaming or shirt-rending *actually* happened, just in my head, to a great deal of my own laughter. Instead, I shouted thanks to Norman with a sincerity I hope related gratitude without anyone having to fulfil well-intentioned promises made too late in the evening.

Back to the present. This leg of my journey, for the most part, starts in Manchester. West of me is Liverpool, the eight-hundred-year-old port town, home of the Beatles and four-hundred-year-old Paul McCartney. Liverpool now dubs itself “The World Capital City of Pop.” A bit of a stretch in my opinion, but no one’s asked for it.

Of greater interest is a village called Meols, across Liverpool’s Mersey River on the Wirral Peninsula, where there’s a Viking longship buried under a pub. The ship was unearthed, sketched roughly on a pad with pencil, and then reburied to avoid construction delays on an adjacent building project. In the developers’ defence this occurred many years ago, before archaeological work was the big business it is today. (Pause for snorting laughter from the archaeology department.) But the current landlords of the pub in Meols are intrigued. The latest wave of interest is happening now, with research being conducted using Ground Penetrating Radar. In time the Viking ship will be dug up once more, likely for good. The uniqueness of this find is that the area’s rich ground clay has preserved the boat intact, not simply yielding a decomposed wood outline, which is often the case in unearthing boat burials. The estuary on this peninsula and the archaeological remains point to the presence of another significant Viking outpost and long-port awaiting further exploration.

Despite still being at Manchester airport, I already feel the pull of my trail. Here I’ll catch a train, the track from Liverpool being the world’s first passenger rail line, and simply getting from A to B thrusts me deeper into a historical mosaic, a leap through a Carrollesque looking glass. I’m seated on a cool steel bench, awaiting the train to York, the day sunny and warm. I’ve had an hour’s sleep in the past twenty-four and feel surprisingly fresh – the rejuvenating effect of travel – excitement and adrenaline, not to mention a very large coffee. Soaking up sun and caffeine on the terminus platform I’m immersed in sound: luggage on

wobbly wheels, a child's laughter interspersed with the *slap-slap* of a smacking hands game, more laughter, a nasal *beep-beep* from a huge, motorized cleaning trolley, people arriving and departing with a range of emotional noises and a great deal of hugging.

A station worker nods in my direction and a rail employee smiles and mouths, "Y'aw'righ'?" and I smile and nod back to both, doing my best to replicate the silent salutation. To my delight I see a nun with a bad habit. And a heavily dressed woman drinks from a tiny bottle of wine between yawns, lips pursing as she sips from the small container. Overhead, blue sky and gossamer cloud – hovering between spring and summer, a seasonal tween.

I board the train and we pull away through white-bloomed jasmine, whooshing under overpasses, past a golf course, red brick homes with white-trimmed windows, a bridge, a creek and over a tram line. Most of the stretch is nestled in greenery, dampened from the city. A lone skyscraper stands sentinel. A church spire looks forlorn and a soccer match is being played on a small pitch. Notes in my journal get shaky, turning to scribbles as the train rocks, the look of someone writing with their alternate hand. I give up, turning the well-used little book in my hands. Moleskine, it proudly states on a printed insert, used by Chatwin and Hemingway. Ah, yes, the preferred notebook of self-loathing alcoholics struggling with sexuality. I'm in fine company. Reading further I learn the word sybaritic, meaning self-indulgent, so naturally I include it.

We pass sleek electric trains on parallel tracks – Virgin Line cars. Old factories loom with towering brick chimneys. Cranes dot the horizon at Manchester Piccadilly. Colourful office buildings hold promise while a once ornate station is weathered and neglected. City slowly morphs into fields of livestock, and buildings change from brick to stone. A man and his kids – a girl and small boy – make their way to their seats. Moving through the coach the tiny boy greets everyone, "Hello. Hello."

The PA crackles on. "I'm Neil (Nee-oo). I'm your conductor. Have your tickets ready please."

A huge stadium takes shape in the distance – Man City? Man United? The concert bombing hasn't yet happened. I only feel excitement. Later, I'm left with a souvenir of sadness.

Now a mom and two kids walk through the car – a boy and little girl who's a doppelgänger to Swoosie Kurtz. She has her lunch from the trolley in a small paper bag with handles. Clearly excited, she bursts into song, an improvised, "Dum-deedy-dum, dum-deedy-dum!" She stops beside me, beaming, clutching her lunch two-handed like a purse at church and gives me another chorus, "Dum-deedy-dum, dum-deedy-dum!"

The train rumbles past a reservoir and a path bordered in yellow honeysuckle, then plunges into a long black tunnel. We emerge from the dark as tea and chocolate biscuits are served and I find myself feeling like elated little Swoosie. "Dum-deedy-dum!"

Blossoms whizz past – blurry purple, white, yellow. A raptor dodges a determined starling – airborne David and Goliath. The blossoms slow, focus, and we roll to a stop. The PA purrs, "This is the Pennine Line." The stop is brief. A whistle sounds from the platform and we pull away, passing a train marked County of Nottinghamshire. I check the map and see we're close to Robin Hood's domain, Sherwood Forest being just south of here. After some time we pull into Leeds, attractive midrise new-builds and cranes on one side, centenarian warehouses on the other. A gargantuan brick guild hall, glass, steel and more cranes rise from the heart of the city. A Siriesque voice announces, "This is Leeds. The next stop will be York."

A woman on the platform in snug skirt and stilettos starts to run, halving her walking speed – a great deal of movement with little forward momentum. The train rolls past apartments so close I could high-five someone on a balcony. Dirty cloud hangs on the city – scowling weather – but blue pushes sulky nimbus aside, opening the sky over horse paddocks and fields of canola. Suddenly it's beautiful and young passengers in a communal area ramp up, hollering and carrying on like birds after rain.

Huge lazy windmills rotate in the distance, four times the height of hydro towers bisecting the line – power grid crossroads. Fields are now deep hues of green with tall tree windbreaks. Inside the coach my windbreaks are less scenic, more lasting. Somewhat territorial. I rise from my seat and my belt catches, ripping hair from beneath my navel. I fight the urge to scream and allow myself a gasping, manly sob.

A solitary passenger wakes, yawning, as we arrive at York. He looks around. “Dammit,” he says. “I was supposed to wake up for Leeds. Someone was supposed to wake me!” Yes, someone should have done something, certainly. Why wasn’t anyone taking care of this able-bodied grown man travelling on his own? Why?! Hopefully someone, somewhere, will do something, at some point, lest he remain on the train forever. I disembark while his journey continues.

York. Another Roman town, two thousand years of recorded history – Northumbria’s political centre, taken over by Danes in 866. What started as raids became an invasion. And the town named by Celts for our old friend the yew-tree and renamed Eoferwic by Saxons became Jórvík, the centre of Viking Britain. Again this place creeps into our saga – roots as deep and far-reaching as those of its namesake yews. You’ll recall brother Biutta, the Lindisfarne survivor, and his correspondence with pen-pal (or quill-pal) Alkuin, in Charlemagne’s Aachen court, which gave us our first colourful account of the Lindisfarne raids. This is Alkuin’s home – Alkuin of York. Not to be confused with Steve Martin’s Theodoric of York, medieval barber. Similar names, different occupations. Alkuin wrote of the Vikings at Lindisfarne, “Never before in Britain has such a terror appeared.” While Theodoric explained, “You know, medicine’s not an exact science, but we’re learning all the time. Why, just fifty years ago they thought a disease like your daughter’s was caused by demonic possession or witchcraft. But nowadays we know that Isabelle is suffering from an imbalance of bodily humors, perhaps caused by a toad or a small dwarf living in her stomach.” To which Theodoric invariably prescribed blood-letting.

This is roughly the middle of Britain, just east of centre. It is, however, a northern community. The Foss and Ouse Rivers merge here, with the Ouse running southeast to meet the Humber at Hull, where ferries shuttle people and cargo to and from Belgium and the Netherlands, as much a portal to Europe now as when longships crossed the North Sea.

The first written history of this area was penned by Romans, inferred as much as anything as it was literally beyond their grasp. From a Roman perspective, the rugged highlands of Britannia and the islands beyond were inhospitable places populated by a mish-mash of Celtic, Gael and Pict, the bloodlines and history of which were already a blur. Rather than

persevering in the traditional Roman pattern of conquer, rule and tax, it was simpler to build a wall to keep the barbarians out. And as the last stone was set in Hadrian's Wall the Romans were able to say, "Gone!" to the Scots and get on with more pressing issues, such as the rise of Christianity and collapse of their empire.

The Saxons, however, those same continental barbarians the Romans (and Russell Crowe) worked so hard to drive north into Germania, managed to succeed where Rome failed. Much like in Scotland, the Romans gave up on Germany and built another wall – The Limes, stretching from the Rhine to the Danube. These Germanic Saxons, seeking more land, sailed to Scotland. In *Historia Brittonum*, Romans tell the account of forty Saxon ships sacking the Orkneys and claiming Pictish lands north of the Firth of Forth. Were these sea-going Saxons some of the earliest Vikings? Proto-proto-Vikings? It's a known fact they worshiped Thor, same as the Scandinavians. Or was Saxon a loose term used by Roman scribes, a convenient catch-all to describe little-known people, akin to chroniclers describing all Scandinavians as Danes? Another frayed historical skein left hanging, to be sewn or cut.

The beauty of tracing historical and genealogical lines is that eventually one winds up on a kind of anthropological Möbius strip – connecting subtly twisting lines like spun rope, quite suitably resembling threads of DNA. Stephen Fry does a good job summarizing this. "It's a very simple, scientific fact," he explains. "Everyone – all of us – are related." And in much the same way Rome built a wall across Britain, leaving Scotland's Picts to themselves, so too were Vikings – Danes – given England's north by the ruling Saxons, with a cross-country border being drawn, separating the Danelaw from England's southern kingdoms.

York, with its burgeoning Scandinavian presence, became another thriving, cosmopolitan Viking centre, much like Dublin. This growth took advantage of England's advanced economic base. The country was already well ahead of Western Europe with respect to commerce, administration, justice and taxation. With the Viking's inherent bias toward trade and urbanization, Northumbria's Jórvík became a force all its own – another London – rich and well-organized, a Viking destination. As Cornwell writes, "Jórvík is like Ceaster … its strength lies in its walls. It guards a river, but the man who rules in Jórvík can claim to rule Northumbria."

Fast forward a few hundred years. Nineteenth-century English politician George Hudson boldly states, “Mak all t’railways cum to York.” Whether George had crap grammar or a speech impediment is unclear. Regardless. York remained a significant commercial centre into the Industrial Revolution – a railway centre with enormous confectionary manufacturing operations, quite literally a sweet hub. Along with a university and railroads, Vikings and candy remain York’s economic lifeblood. “Vikings and candy?!” you say. “Do those even go together?” In fact they do.

“Wunderbar!” was the Cadbury tag line. Suitable enough, as it was the product name. Peanut butter, caramel and chocolate. A good chew. No, that was Peanut Chews. Either way, Cadbury’s Wunderbar was good. *Is* good. But before we even knew the candy we loved the ads – savage Vikings tearing open a chest of booty, its bounty a wealth of candy bars – Wunderbars! Because as we all know, next to longboats and pillaging, Vikings are best known for their love of peanut butter, caramel and chocolate. As kids we said it like they did in the ads, heavily Germanated with a vee-sounding W. *Voondah-bah*! A love of peanut butter, caramel and chocolate aside, on some level we clearly longed to be hairy Norsemen, heady with the intoxication of battle-lust and too much sugar.

Those TV ads first ran forty years ago. But they clearly worked. I was shopping recently, the cashier gave me a pull-tab and I won a Cadbury candy bar of my choice (maximum size sixty grams). Feeling a proper winner, I made my way to Customer Service, where I was directed by the two people there to a small bin of Cadbury treats to choose from. I chose a Wunderbar while the two of them, a woman in her thirties and a man in his forties, both chorused, “Wunderbar!” We laughed and enjoyed an ad that hasn’t run (as far as I know) for thirty-odd years. Leaving the store in a fine mood, from behind me I heard another exultant “Wunderbar!” from the pair. It was too good. And as my saga trail carries me on to who knows where, I still imagine discovering long-buried caches of Viking artifacts littered with Wunderbar wrappers.

Now I’ve arrived, having cum to York just like all t’railways. From the station I walk atop a section of city wall to my hotel, check in, climb stairs to my room, drop my pack and head out to explore. It’s hot and bright, late Sunday afternoon on a bank holiday weekend. Energy is good, the city busy and vibrant. I pass several excellent buskers in the span of a few

hundred meters: a young woman on guitar, a Susan Boyle lookalike with the matching voice, and two long-haired guys on electric guitar and smooth, jazzy flute. I'm soon out of coins. Another guy doesn't bother entertaining, simply demands spare change and I figure it must be tough being an outright beggar in a city of talented buskers.

After a wander of town I settle in for Sunday roast dinner at Walmgate Ale House and sit at a nooked counter facing the street – a naturally scalloped slab of timber, where I notch into place like a puzzle piece. I'm served a wood platter of food with side dishes – roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, roast potatoes and parsnips, cauliflower cheese, carrots and steamed chard – food for two, for one. This I wash down with red lager tasting of summertime cherries.

From the Walmgate I duck into the Rose and Crown for a pint of Golden Fleece. Classic rock oozes from tinny speakers – *Hey Joe* by Hendrix and the tobacco rasp of Janice Joplin, "Come on, come on, come on, come on and take it!" My one hour of sleep in the last day-and-a-half's catching up with me and I'm nodding, a hypnagogic hover on the cusp of slumber. In the words of Pico Iyer, "Not quite a dream state, but certainly not wakefulness." Maybe it's the Golden Fleece – thoughts of counting sheep. Did Jason really cross the world for this stuff? It's not that good. Why take the Argonauts? Why not the Stampeders? "Swee-ee-ee-ee-eet. Sweet city woman!" I've hit my threshold – too much classic rock and too little sleep. My violent head-bobs must look like I have a condition. Or I'm drunk. So I gather myself and shuffle back to my room for a very deep, very short, new-time-zone sleep.

Awake at one AM, I read, watch some comedy, drink instant coffee and head out to explore at first light, excited to be somewhere ancient and new. As explorer-writer Freya Stark puts it, "To awaken quite alone in a strange town is one of the pleasantest sensations in the world." Aside from a couple of joggers, dogs and a friendly sanitation guy, I have York to myself at five AM. I walk a heavily treed path along the River Ouse for a few kilometers, the water a wide band of silver, a hogweed scent in the air. Eventually the path narrows and a tangle of overhanging branches feels like a leafy corridor to Narnia. An LBJ holds a cicada in its beak – prey only marginally smaller than the hunter, like a person carrying a calf to the dinner table. An array of pigeons – grays, browns and throaty ring-necks –

deliver a deep chorus of *oo-ooo-oo, oo-ooo-oo*. Flitting songbirds add high melodies and busy lyrical chatter. One pigeon's draped over its cup-size nest of twigs as though a house addition's long overdue. Its coo is a continuous husky purr, like the rumbling growl from the back of a lion's throat. Or Janis Joplin.

There's a tidy line of canal boat-homes moored in a row – converted old barges, likely horse-drawn in their day. Wood smoke puffs from a chimney, achingly inviting. A window blind rises and I fight the urge to peep. Geese and ducks patrol the river, slow moving water rippled with breeze. There's a piercing honk from a grey goose, which I now know is tastiest when smoked, or used to make vodka. The secluded pathway of green is fragrant with blossoms, heavy and floral. Massive willows hang in drapes like shimmering Rastafarian hair. Ring-necked pigeons seem indifferent to my presence, staring at me an arm's length away like displays in a natural history museum.

I get back atop the city wall and walk a stretch new to me. It's just been unlocked for the day and becomes a private space above town, resplendent in pink blossoms with birds poking from branches like feathery Christmas ornaments. At street-level a pair of Canada geese with fat yellow goslings wander down the centre of a street. People chuckle and take pictures.

After a couple of hours I find a coffee house with a huge easy chair and comparably sized bowl of coffee – a vessel I could soak feet in – and immerse myself in both. A mentally challenged man with a warm smile approaches, telling me to get a salmon sandwich for my breakfast. So I do. Then grin at the barista as the man leaves, proffering the sandwich from a self-serve case.

"I was told to get this."

"Ah, bless him," she says with a smile.

The next few days pass in a pleasingly tiring, sensory blur. Fighting jet lag, I run in icy predawn along the river with cooing pigeons and wafting wood smoke. Beneath gloomy gargoyles I watch a sprawling production in Yorkminster of *The Greatest Story Ever Told* – venue and performance both epic – scores of performers cascading over central stairs under towering stone arches and stained glass. Noah's animals spill through the cathedral – everything life size. Following two long hours it's only intermission, with the Romans having only just arrived! Which must mean

two or three more hours of persecution and cross-nailing still to come. God help us if it carries on to resurrection. Satisfied with my experience I take my leave from what I rename The *Longest* Story Ever Told.

Walking back, a solitary red light emerges, bright and hanging in twilight sky. It can only be Mars, guiding me home. In my mind I hear young Sting wailing, discouraging the illumination of just such a beacon. But it marks my way, a tiny airborne stoplight guiding me back, no different than the star of the gift-bearing wise men I just left at Yorkminster. While the Magi went to Bethlehem I continue through York, stopping only for lamb in a naan from a place called the Viking Kabab.

Under overcast gray I explore Yorkshire Museum and the surrounding gardens of St Mary's Abbey – thousand-year-old Norman ruins atop two-thousand-year-old Roman foundations. Like Chichester, this seems another town marked out in millennia. The Benedictine Abbey, founded in 1055, was dedicated to King Olaf II of Norway – Saint Olaf following his death in 1030 – the Viking who raided Spain and later pulled down London Bridge. Not to be confused with Olaf Crowbone, the Orcadian Norseman who was Norway's King Olaf I. Both played pivotal roles in converting the Norse to Christianity at much the same time Harald Bluetooth was doing likewise in Denmark and other parts of Scandinavia.

The remaining walls of St Mary's Abbey are stunning, even in today's dreary overcast. Heavy sandstone and craning arches evoke a calm that permeates surrounding greenspace. Spirituality resonates. According to Thomas Charles Lethbridge, expert in alternative realities, "Recollections can inhabit or cling to places, and objects can become infused with the sentiment of an experience." Which is what I feel here, emanating from the crumbling walls. And I smile as three ring-necked pigeons saunter past, strolling the abbey like ruminating padres, white collars prominent and wings clasped behind backs.

The museum itself descends into dungeon-like space, the feel of catacombs. In a dim-lit room I peer through display glass at The Gilling Sword and The York Helmet – Viking relics from the late ninth century. I learn of Jórvík's place in the Viking World, from Ivar the Boneless to Eric

Bloodaxe, York's last Viking King. A carved slab of stone is displayed, its wide edge carved in intricate detail, scenes from the Saga *Völsunga*, along with the showcase display of the Bedale Hoard, a spectacular pile of hack silver, coins and heavy wrought jewellery.

Circumambulating town I visit the Jórvík Viking Centre, still recovering from vicious flooding in 2015. It's now being ingeniously restored. Most artifacts were excavated from three local sites. Now, as the Viking Centre gets refurbished, displays are being temporarily exhibited where they were found, each a fascinating locale in its own right: beautiful York St Mary's, the haunting Undercroft of Yorkminster, and York Theatre, beneath which are the ruins of a medieval hospital. Each will open in turn with interim exhibits until the Centre's restored. Now, for my visit, the medieval hospital beneath the theatre's open to the public, with a display of Viking Age artifacts.

There's a handful of us browsing our way through the low-ceilinged cellar. A curator in period garb speaks at length in great volume to no one in particular. I assume he's an actor from the theatre upstairs, then wonder if he's even sanctioned or just some nutter who's here of his own volition, having thrown something on from the medieval end of his wardrobe, perhaps a refreshing change from his Renaissance Fayre attire.

I work my way around the whitewashed arching columns of the little room, the look of it oddly Spanish, learning about medieval midwives, physicians, apothecaries, and barbers like Steve Martin's Theodoric. Treatment methods varied, but all caregivers shared a common understanding of anatomy – the human body being made up of four humors – blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile, which correspond with the four elements of air, water, earth and fire. Individual complexion was the result of a particularly predominant humor. When a given humor grew too strong, illness ensued. This, combined with alignment of the stars, determined an individual's health and treatment. (Later I'd visit with a naturopath who maintains many of these means of diagnosis in her twenty-first-century practice.)

Now I'm at one of the best exhibits ever: a lump of shit, like the thing Bill Murray pulls from the pool in *Caddyshack*. But unlike Carl's find, this Baby Ruth *is* a big deal. Plenty of historical evidence gets gleaned from waste. Middens, trash heaps and cesspits offer archaeologists

samples of what people ate, indicating dietary patterns, hunting, gathering and farming behaviour, agricultural techniques, cooking methods and the general health of a society on a regional basis. Good shit to be sure.

This particular log, displayed under glass in the wash of a bright spotlight, is known as the Lloyd's Bank Turd – found at the site of the local Lloyd's and sponsored by the bank for museum display. It's basically fossilized – mineralized to be precise – which makes it a coprolite. I can't help myself and laugh out loud. Mostly because there's now a group of us doing our best to ignore the actor/curator delivering his soliloquy forte voce, studying something that should be flushed as though it were carved by Michelangelo. Which it couldn't possibly be. All *his* shit pieces are at London's V-and-A. And I imagine curators and the board deciding on a suitable name for this prestigious sponsor's exhibit.

"And what do we call it?" Lord Rutherford asks, peering over half glasses under monumental gray eyebrows.

"Poo?" young Bryan Digglesbury suggests.

"No. No, I don't think so," Evan Twerk interjects, teeth addressing everyone around the table, but offers no alternatives.

In a soft voice, secretary Sheila Bunce asks, "Is *shit* a tad vulgar?"

"Quite. Quite." A few nods.

"How about defecation?"

"I like defecation!" Clarence Ewans-Smythe barks with conviction. "Excellent stuff!"

"Too many sounds," Evan Twerk adds, sucking a few teeth. "You know. Syllables."

"How about a turd?" A lack of objection follows, the silence of consensus.

"Ah, good. It's a turd." There's an audible grunt and contented sighs around the table, Lord Rutherford visibly relaxed. "Sheila, please inform Lloyd's we're finished."

I spend another day walking York's wall (or walls more accurately), views varying with direction and daylight. More treetops, blossoms, birds and history. I lunch at a hole in the wall called, quite suitably, Hole in Wall – a pie, a pint and a cozy wood fire. Following more exploration I have a photo-worthy meal at the Guy Fawkes Inn – fine-dining food in an unpretentious pub. You'll recall along with Alkuin, York was home to Guy Fawkes, co-collaborator in the nefarious plot to assassinate King James and blow up England's parliament in 1605. Celebrations commemorating Fawkes' fiery scheme continue to this day, no different than the Viking burning rituals of Up Helly Aa – significant threads in our tapestry, knotting loose-ends like Theodoric tying off pumping arteries.

The barman comes to clear my plate.

"Do you have WiFi?" I ask.

"Yes, but the signal's not too strong. The password's 'gunpowder plot.' The O in plot's a zero." Then he smiles as though we're now conspirators, and I fight the urge to glance over my shoulder.

Dire Straits seeps from a well-hidden sound system. I fish out my journal, hunching over it like a student thwarting copycats, and scribble the following:

Seated. In an ancient pub
a high-back hardwood chair
drink placed on ebony
-stained table
with a wobble
Contentment. Distinguished, dark
imperial pint of porter frothed in white
the look of Morgan Freeman
balanced
on a tipsy punching clown
Performance. One-foot jazzy
tap, as I work to still the sway
that slowly loses relevance

crescendoing in satisfying
swallows. Now Knopfler
mumbles far away
So Far Away, so true
so very far away, from you
and everywhere –
perhaps I'll have one more

It's a new day and I'm exploring like Dora, if Dora were pale and fifty. Compact museums are tucked into gatehouses on the crenelated perimeter of York's expansive city wall – the Richard III Experience at Monk Bar and the Henry VII Experience at Micklegate Bar – dense museums stacked into three little storeys of cold stone and weathered wood, the venues themselves remarkable. From the museum interiors I snap photos of the wall through arrow slots – gaps for hot oil, stones and crossbow bolts – and learn of the War of the Roses until my head swims.

Google insists I'm right by a coffee house but I can't find it, until I realize it too, like the museums I've come from, is neatly hidden in a section of wall – no signage, just a small chalkboard by a narrow wooden door. The day's gone from surly to downright angry and as rain starts I duck into Gateway Coffee in Walmgate for chai latte and an Aussie bite. Every little landing of the stacked and rickety coffee house is decorated with wobbly, mismatched, comfy furniture. I have no desire to leave, and get the impression other patrons feel the same. It's like someone's living room – cozy and homey, a sense of hygge. I'm served by the kindest man in the world and when I eventually leave he gives me a smiling, "God bless you."

With a pack on my back and one in my hand it's time to leave. I'm heading south to Oxford for a quick explore. Then to Reading to meet up with Deb, from where we'll carry on to Cornwall. I skirt the wall en route

to the station. In the centre of town sits York Castle, a stone crown on a steep grassy pap – the look regal yet oddly out of scale, like the fat pigeon on the tiny nest.

Last night I had drinks and snacks at The Whippet with a server-cum-patron named Sam – a philosophy grad student from Wales about to begin his studies in Copenhagen. He was working on Don DeLillo's *Underworld* – a familiar tome – while I savoured a slim volume of Simon Armitage, poetic prose from a contemporary English poet.

It's now an icy cold morning and I divide up food I'm carrying, giving it to two homeless guys. Our interactions are friendly, appreciative – both ways. This is not a homeless climate. I spend a few final minutes admiring York's wall by the station. Two ring-necked pigeons flap past – feathery vicars in flight, and people are forced to duck as the birds weave by at head height. Entering the station I settle into a coffee kiosk with planters, a patch of artificial grass and a small putting green with a single hole and putter, where I warm up with coffee, read, and wait for a train heading south.

When the train arrives I settle in, a squishy seat providing a reassuring hug. Outside of town we pass concrete hourglass cooling towers. On the other side of the tracks are a field of black and tan cows – energy spanning the line, electric and methane. Geese fly from a creek as we howl past, the train rocking violently. Sipping hot coffee becomes a near contact sport. An arched bridge bumps past, hoisting another rail line over a dark creek. A gothic cathedral and red brick village sit next to a motorway. Overhead, weather's disgruntled, crystal-ball gray. In the words of Anna Badkhen, a prescient sky.

An excited, busy little girl rides with her brother and dad. The conductor gives her a pen and asks if she wants to announce the next station. She runs with him to the back of the train, then from the PA the softest voice imaginable comes on: "Sheffield. This is Sheffield."

As we approach Oxford I'm given breakfast – something resembling the Lloyd's Bank exhibit, served in a soft English muffin with brown sauce no less. Despite a visual similarity I presume this one tastes better. Somewhat. While an unsavoury image lingers, the taste dissipates as I exit the train.

OXFORD

In the same way the Lothbrok family led us around the Mediterranean, here in Oxford I'm tracking another multigenerational Viking line – Harald Bluetooth's clan, specifically his son Sven Forkbeard and grandson Canute. At the turn of the first millennium Forkbeard's power was growing, and with it his lust for wealth. Increasingly extortionate raids took place here in Mercia as well as in Wessex. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports that from the late 990s to the early 1000s Danes hauled the staggering sum of two hundred thousand pounds of silver out of England. British mints were producing coins for the express purpose of ransom payments, with more English coins from this period being found in Denmark than England.

This was the time of England's King Ethelred – Ethelred the Unready. Not that he forgot keys or didn't bring a sweater, but that he was ill-advised. And on what may be the poorest advice he received, Ethelred tried to purge his country of Vikings. Grisly ethnic cleansing occurred here in 1002 – Ethelred's attempt to rid England of Danes and staunch the hemorrhaging extortion. Known as the Oxford slaughter, it was as horrific as anything, anywhere. But Ethelred's efforts were as effective as trying to save a picnic by killing bees. It just pisses off the bees. And so it was with Sven Forkbeard, who'd had enough of his hive being bloodied. Mustering an army, he launched an invasion of England in 1013. For *this*, Ethelred was ready. With bags packed, he fled.

The following year Forkbeard died and Canute, commander of the tides at Chichester, assumed his father's role in 1014. He was, after all, Canute the Great, ruler of Anglo-Scandinavia – the North Sea Empire. Almost. It took a few more years to gather it all under his rule. But unlike Ethelred, Canute was more than ready, with an armada of two hundred ships and ten thousand men. (A hundred tons of inherited silver buys an awful lot of boats and soldiers.)

Following Sven's invasion and Canute's subsequent reinforcement, England was done, or Dane you could say – Scandinavian until Canute's death. Which left things open to Rollo's kin, with William coming from Normandy to do it all over again. William's invasion was refined by comparison – French nobility, courtiers and whatnot, while Canute's attack was a traditional Viking assault, what Oliver calls conquering

England with an axe. The results, however, were the same. Canute's remains lie in Winchester Cathedral just north of Chichester but his legacy of innovative commerce survives. Canute the Great standardized European currency a thousand years before the Euro, making England the centre of the European common market.

Only one other English monarch bears the epithet "The Great" and that's ninth-century King Alfred, king of Anglo-Saxon England. A little over a century before Canute, Alfred, for the most part, successfully defended the southern English realm from the Northmen. Alfred advanced England's legal system, laying the groundwork for the governmental organization that spring-boarded the country economically, the same flourishing system the Vikings capitalized on in York.

Alfred's brother Æthelred was on the throne (ruling, that is) when the Great Heathen Army – droves of Viking immigrants – landed in East Anglia in 865. From an English perspective, it looked like Danes intended to take over Anglo-Saxon England – Wessex, Mercia, East Anglia and Northumbria. It should be noted King Æthelred is not the unready Ethelred that later faced Sven Forkbeard and Canute.

Alfred fought alongside his brother to keep the Great Army at bay but the hometown Saxons were unsuccessful. The Viking Army, led by Ivar the Boneless (how he managed to do *anything* is anyone's guess) and Ivar's brother Halfdan (both of Ragnar's brood), crushed the English forces at Reading. Alfred retaliated with back-to-back victories only to lose two more battles, after which Æthelred died in 871. Following his brother's death, Alfred became king.

As the bloody chess match continued it was evident the Northmen weren't going away. Alfred made peace with Halfdan and Ivar, and the Vikings retreated from Reading to London. England was halved, with Wessex and Mercia remaining under Alfred's rule, and Danelaw was established in the north, with Ivar ruling Northumbria from York.

In 880, Alfred signed the Treaty-of-Alfred-and-Guthrum, Guthrum now being the leader of the Great Army in East Anglia. This effectively neutralized the Viking threat of invasion in southeastern England. Interestingly, the following ten years saw much of that same Danish Army – a mass of immigrants – move back to the continent, once more chasing greener pastures and settling coastal Belgium.

Eventually Alfred's grandson would defeat a combined Viking army of Norse and Danes from Dublin and York, uniting England under Anglo-Saxon rule from Wessex, effectively putting an end to Viking Jórvík. But this was no more than a lapse in Viking domination, a simmering cauldron slid to a back burner.

I haven't put nearly the effort or resources Forkbeard and Canute put into their arrival. My time here in Oxford's nothing more than a sortie before moving on to Reading, a kind of history raid – places and things of personal interest. I start with espresso at the Angel Inn, where a man named Jacob the Jew opened England's first coffee house in 1651. It became a national craze, and with great concern *The Women's Petition Against Coffee* was written in 1674, claiming men had become "effeminate, babbling French layabouts." Which you have to admit are the very worst kind of effeminate babbling layabouts. But I risk it and quaff a quick doppio with no resulting signs of increased femininity, babbling or Frenchness. The espresso's tasteless, but expensive. And feeling I've dodged a bullet, or more accurately a seventeenth-century musket ball, I carry on.

Relying on Google Maps, canals and an approximate grid of meandering streets, I make my way through the centre of Oxford. Peering through buildings into courtyards reveals gems at every turn – manicured squares of trimmed grass at a score of colleges scattered around town. Bells ring – it's all poetically English, refined and scholarly. I want to wear a gown. No cap. Maybe a clutch and heels. Perhaps the very place instills some of the silliness that fuelled Terry Jones and Michael Palin.

I find a tiny bookstore and pick up another Simon Armitage, feeling terribly academic with a book of poetry in hand, strolling the streets of Oxford. I turn down a narrow lane to suss out the Turf Tavern – Inspector Morse's local. Lewis's too. I step in and a low ceiling timber rushes to crush my skull. Dazed, I stagger directly ahead to the small bar.

"Pint of bitter, and some gauze, please."

The proprietor chuckles, "Yeah, watch yer' 'edd."

A customer returns a tray and a plate to the bar. I ask her what she had.

"Steak pie. Very good," she smiles.

I take her advice, order the same and carry my pint to a private nook – a narrow window-bench with pillows, midpoint on the pub-tearoom continuum, definitely a bar but somewhat frilly. I open my new Armitage and read the first poem – short and stunningly moving, it immediately makes me cry. More surprised than embarrassed, I stuff the volume back in my bag and bury my nose in my pint.

Something about my brief stop here – the sense of a scavenger hunt – has me moving quickly, imagined urgency. It's ludicrous but fun. With the bookstore, coffee house and Turf Tavern under my belt I'm on to my next stop – The University of Oxford's Ashmolean Museum. This is the gem that's drawn me to Oxford. I'd say crowning jewel but that would be uninspired, as you'll see. Inside the museum I learn of artifact typologies, a form of comparative dating used to determine how things develop over time. There's a painted rune stone with deep red gashes and the magnificent Cuerdale hoard, a Viking cache amassed around the Irish Sea.

But it's the Alfred Jewel that's brought me here, a spectacular piece of Anglo-Saxon jewellery made for King Alfred. Rock crystal and delicately detailed enamel cast in gold, it's a priceless piece of goldsmithing representing sense of sight. I'm ecstatic, having watched Neil Oliver hold this gem on TV, a defining piece of England's Viking Age, albeit Saxon. Exactly what it came from or how it was used is unclear, which adds to its mystery. Most scholars believe it was the end piece of a wooden rod used for following words to aid reading, the way a child might hold a ruler under lines in a book.

I wait for people to move on, then gaze at the piece from all sides. It's well lit, the glass smudgy with fingerprints, the jewel slightly distorted given its convex shape, but magical – a piece of Viking Age history – from the only other "Great" King of England (along with Canute), the pious man who kept the Vikings at bay. The description embossed on the display case reads, "The Alfred Jewel is probably the single most famous archaeological object in England." I imagine the energy of Alfred, the time, the place. And smile.

From the Ashmolean I've one more stop to make – The Eagle and Child, affectionately known as the Bird and Baby. Another pub, it's the meeting place of The Inklings, a group of writers who gathered to discuss literature, brainstorm their latest compositions, swap ideas and no doubt

solve world problems as they drank. The most notable members of this intimate club? C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, creators of Narnia and Middle Earth. Some of this is scribbled on a blackboard, but unlike the Turf Tavern – hungrily promoting itself as a notable old pub – the Bird and Baby seems content just being, knowing its literary significance yet remaining an inviting, no nonsense pub.

Following another pint of bitter I take a wide detour, walking a bushy path along an endless canal – the Oxford Canal Heritage Trail – paralleling a band of murky water the colour of smoked emerald. There's another series of floating homes, long and narrow, the occasional homeowner checking mail or adjusting power cords, and an assortment of walkers – a rural feel in the centre of town, thickly bordered in tall trees and shrubs hiding it from the rest of the world. With gently moving leaves and a stretch of lazy water, my pace subsides like a venting sigh of air-brakes on a big rig coming to rest. I'm ready to slow down and get to my next destination – Reading, again – another pleasing circle (in a spiral). It's been a while since I was here, when my viking trail began. So much and so little has changed.

RETURN TO CORNWALL

In Reading I find a conveniently located ale house – a standing bar and warren of tiny wood booths replicating railcar seating. Ambient noise is a gruff array of *fookin' this* and *fookin' that* with an occasional *noice, noice*! Back in my room I settle in with takeaway dinner and Inspector Lewis, watching him walk Oxford streets I've just left. Later, after tossing and turning in a fit of lingering jetlag, I give up and go downstairs to drink at the bar, a small counter adjacent to lobby reception. A young guy – the lone employee – pulls pints of draft while I'm kept company by the only other person around, an uninteresting Northumbrian now living in Italy, back to see her family.

A scruffy man ducks into the hotel, following an incoming guest through the door as it closes and locks. He asks for a room, to which the guy at reception says there's none and tells him to leave. The man's expression changes and turning to go he tells the young guy he'll kill him – kill him!

I slide from my barstool and move toward reception, hoping to do nothing but show solidarity with the young guy and a visible two-against-

one. Scruffy Man slinks out the door to the street and I ask Reception Guy if he's okay.

"Oh, thanks, I'm fine," he says.

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, yeah. He's in here all the time."

"You're kidding?!"

"No, that's why I say there's no rooms. Now he'll go to the hotel down the street," he says with a shrug.

With that he goes back to his desktop while I go back to my pint and what's become intolerable conversation with the only other person awake in Reading. She's trying to convince both me and herself the pyramid scheme she's started flogging is in fact worthwhile, and I find myself hoping the murderous man will return.

By the time Deb arrives later in the day I feel a comforting shift to local time. With a quick turnaround, we train from Reading across Devon and Cornwall, a now familiar journey. Pretty countryside, towns of varying smallness and coastal views – boats, beaches and water – interspersed with biscuits and tea. Scribbling in my Moleskine I remember a sitcom where a character insists keeping a journal makes one a journalist. The train reaches the end of the tracks, and with packs on backs we walk into St Ives, stopping for pasties en route. Meat, veg and gravy in pastry somehow makes arrival in Cornwall official.

I spend an afternoon on a boat jigging for mackerel and catch three fish simultaneously on my multi-hook line.

"I'm king of the world!" I holler, embarrassed the moment I say it.

A short while later a ten-year-old pulls in two fish at once.

"Two's the record!" he shouts proudly.

The deck hand points at me. "That guy got three!"

"Yeah, but he's an adult," the boy replies. Valid point.

The skipper rumbles us to another shoal between Porthmeor Beach and Seal Island. He cuts the engine, we drift and grab rods once more. Overhead, a double line of jet streams bisects the sky and our dissipating wake mirrors the view, two bands of white carved through blue.

From the shallows a gull takes a crab, orange legs wriggling from its beak. My line twitches and I pull up a sand eel – a writhing silver thing the size of a garter snake. I release it, watching it swim away at the surface until a herring gull flies in, taking it in one fluid lunge-swallow. And immediately a big black-back gull appears, smashing the smaller gull in a flying rugby tackle, an attempt to force it to cough up the eel. Wings thrash about like thrown punches and the herring gull gets away, swallowed meal intact as far as we can tell.

Back in our unit I roast the mackerel, plating two and baking two more into a pie. A good day on the water and four fine meals, all for fifteen quid. Flopped on the sofa like an eel-stuffed seabird, I stare through a skylight that's become a living picture frame. A herring gull's spying on me, peering like a child through a stairwell railing, snuck from bed to see what the grown-ups are doing. A clean line of cloud inches down, top to bottom, barely perceptible. Maybe it's a milky floater or partial cataract. Then I realize it's a jet stream, gently drifting in stratospheric breeze, tailing some plane long gone.

Next day I jog the coastline in Sunday morning quiet. A pod of bottlenose dolphins rolls past, snorkel-breath echoing off shoreline rock. I run alongside for a timeless stretch until they pull away, the direction of Land's End. Which leaves me convinced I was a much better person in a previous life, to be experiencing this, this time around.

Monday on the Coast Path: a giddy feeling as everyone else goes to work. From the footpath Deb and I descend to the beach and follow a sea-scalloped coast. Peering into a shoreline cave I see a tight circle of paw prints, remnants of tail chasing. Sir Leslie Stephen – Virginia Woolf's dad – described this bay as "a pocket-paradise with a sheltered cove of sand in easy reach (for 'Ginia even) just below."

Tide’s low and scraps of shipwreck – pieces of boiler – sit lodged in wet sand as though wondering how they wound up here. Further along is another scattering of 150-year-old half-buried, algae-covered boat bits – the look of rock and feel of mossy petrification. It reminds me of St Mary’s ruins in York – its sandstone skeleton a beached whale, one last massive breach onto abbey grounds, crumbling ribs of wall collapsing where they lay. Perhaps a natural order.

Back on marked trail, the path climbs to a fork – one way’s the Coast Path, the other St Michael’s Way – continuation of the Spanish Santiago de Compostela, leading to the one-time Viking stronghold in Galicia. We follow the shore, creeping down a crumbling rock-and-concrete stairway, returning to the beach by way of a rusty embankment, iron-rich earth stained with trickling water. We’ve done this a dozen times but every step feels new. “Familiarity dissolves with distance,” as Armitage described it here.

Further on we come across two anglers seated on the sand – a cooler between them, long baited lines cast into the mouth of the Hayle. I say hello to the two men.

“Where abouts in Canada you from?” one asks in response to my greeting, which I like – a man who knows his accents, and doesn’t assume everyone across the pond’s American. He introduces his fishing companion. “This is my best mate,” he says, inclining his head toward his buddy, who smiles and nods. I like this too. Good friends and a day of fishing.

Coast Path: St Ives to Zennor. Weather’s fair, my determination steeped – tea that needs drinking before getting bitter. Only one way I’m willing to do this, and that’s start to finish. Now on the trail, I step around an explosion of feathers – a kill. No trace of meat or bone. Just a splat of bloody white feathers. An omen?

I come to an unmarked fork. Twisting land makes the choice unclear – it’s never as simple as keeping the sea in sight. I stand and stare a short while, bewildered. And then a raven lands on one side and caws. I take the raven’s path. This happens again a short distance on, another fork, only

this time two ravens alight to one side, showing me the way with a single, unanimous caw. Far from anything, I find myself far from alone.

Reaching a steep, unnerving stretch I carry on, climbing and breaking through rough foliage. Sheer granite rises on one side and a precipitous two-hundred-foot drop falls to the sea on the other. The trail's the width of one boot, hidden beneath leafy branches with needles. Doubt takes root like a young shoot snaking from the soil, holding my feet in place. Wind swirls against the cliff, not pushing but pulling, coaxing me to the edge, to rocks and sea. As I concentrate on breathing and footing, a pipit alights on wind-stunted gorse and chirps what I can only describe as encouragement. Maybe it knows the ravens. It sings a quick burst and flies ahead a short distance, then repeats this. A grimace I didn't know I had melts into a grin and I follow. This continues – a brief trill, a flutter ahead, and waiting for me to catch up – until the two of us crest the cliff where trail and land open, the path now wide and level. I catch my breath and take it all in. Then notice the little pipit, like my fear, has gone.

I follow a stone slab bridge across a chorusing waterfall in small splashy steps. Spattered blossoms dot hillside in purple, mauve, red and white while a solitary orchid bends and shakes in a breeze, the look of a tiny dashboard hula girl. Snails on plants add soft mottled colour, yellow geometrics and nautilus swirls. These slow-moving, meaty morsels are surviving species of those first brought here by Romans, a simple sustainable food source.

Moorland stretches away from the sea – high scrub and windblown bracken. "As you value your life or your reason, keep away from the moor," Conan Doyle writes in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. I value both but trudge on, passing between wind- and salt-stunted trees – a remote bonsai garden, trimmed and shaped by the elements. Traipsing alone through moors, Armitage quotes St Bernard of Clairvaux: "O, beata solitudo; o, sola beatitudo!" (Happy solitude is the one true happiness!) I try doing likewise but find the tongue-twister too taxing.

In the distance land rises into rocky tors, granite slabs we hiked from Zennor – Stone Age fences and fields above the undulating B3306. At the water's edge I scramble up, down, over and around similar hunks of granite – boulders the glowing colour of coffee with cream and bronze. I climb a creek – a burbling stretch of trail where water claims its course,

checking off headlands as I go – Man's Head to Clodgy Point, around Hor Point, then Pen Enys to Pen Sawzen Point. I've admired this stretch from land and sea – my herring hunt around Seal Island. Now that same island, known as The Western Carrack, is a satisfying landmark – rejuvenating, as I close in on Zennor. Weather holds. I won't turn back, completing the tramp with a degree of satisfaction I find hard to articulate. Personal dragon-slaying.

A gannet smashes into ocean the colour of gems, a fulmar wheels, and huge seabirds adorn Seal Island. Pelicans? Albatross? At last I reach Zennor Head, the end of my trek. I sit on a rock on the cliff and dig a cheese and chutney sandwich from my pack to celebrate, dispatching a clingy demon.

Following my modest triumph, I head to the Tinners Arms, where I settle in for a warm pint of copper ale. Today there's no fire in the hearth, no other people, and I find the environment lacking. I ask about food, get a puzzled look, and let it go. Another lone man enters and orders a brandy with chips and ketchup, which I consider an excellent lunch. As I leave I see him seated in the garden and disappointedly realize it's actually shandy he's drinking. I could've sworn he said brandy. It would make the story much better.

I catch a bus to St Ives, an open-top double-decker, and sit upstairs in the wind. The narrow road winds through overhanging trees that *thwack* on seatbacks and keep passengers ducking and shielding eyes. It's ridiculous fun, extremely unsafe. A fox in a field watches us pass. I didn't know they're so tall, having only seen them pancaked on the highway. (Yes, the one in the Wes Anderson flick that talked like George Clooney was a decent height, but he walked upright.) Surviving the open-air bus ride and branch thrashing, I walk from St Ives terminal to St Ia Church for a piano recital – sombre sonatas under stained glass and wall-mounted apostles.

Next day finds us on a looping hill walk and lunch at St Ives Brewery – crab salad on Turkish pide, high harbour views and soaring gulls under sunny sky. Back in our Lighthouse unit we peek through a window to a roof across the lane where herring gulls tend their eggs. I wonder if it's the

same birds we saw nesting before. But this time chicks emerge and we happily watch a small family grow.

Nestled into swaddling furniture, I flip through journal entries of local culinary memories: megrim, plaice, scallops and cod, chipolatas and Cumberland sausages, duck, lamb and a jug of cucumber Pimms on Porthminster Beach. As well as food we've sampled history and culture at the St Ives Museum – curators as informative as the exhibits – and Barbara Hepworth Museum and Sculpture Garden – dreamy greenspace with subtropical flora, a meandering circuit of bronzes nestled in trees and patches of grass – an Easter egg hunt cast in precious metal.

Recalling Hepworth's path of bronze I think of the Age – raw material putting this place on the map. Around 1500 BC – late Bronze Age – Sweden's Lord or Chief of Kivik came here for copper and tin, the makings of bronze. When the king's grave in Sweden was unearthed, it revealed petroglyphs showing his travels from Scandinavia through Wales to here, carrying on around the Mediterranean. Archaeologists describe the Lord of Kivik as a Ulysses. Other records depict his oar-powered longships with lur-playing processions, the epitome of Nordic pageantry. But bronze, from places like this, drove his exploration, making him one of the earliest Vikings.

While Stone Age power came from knowledge – astronomy, celestial cycles and stone circles like those we touched at Zennor and Orkney – Bronze Age influence was less mystical, more tangible – trade networks and contacts, what Oliver calls the shift from *what* you knew to *who* you knew. Worship shifted too, from ethereal to earthly, heavens to heroes, with travel adding value to things from afar. The Lord of Kivik may well have set the bar – one of the first Grand Tourists, collecting souvenirs and objects of envy, sentiments of "Wish you were here."

In need of sun and wind on the face, I bundle up for a blustery walk around The Island, Porthgwidden to Porthmeor Beach, and climb to the Chapel of Saint Nicholas. I can make out our building, our unit, a series of small stacked floors and steep stairs. I tramp back for a pint of Betty Stogs at the Sloop Inn, built in the fourteenth century – the same time Icelanders

were writing the Sagas. A quirky old building, the Sloop's all nooks, crannies and alcoves. Off each crooked little room is a crooked little deck. Small picnic tables are half-filled with drinkers and dogs. Everyone's seated on one side, facing the sea, reminding me of Canetti explaining the clustering effect of crowd symbols. "The sea is a distinct one." I keep wandering through rooms, turning corners, getting turned around, amazed to never find myself where I started. Eventually I find a secluded little outdoor space with a view of the sea and settle in.

As I enjoy my beer in a fine British pub I reread one of Pete Brown's books on enjoying beer in fine British pubs – life imitates art. Reminding me of a pint or two enjoyed at the Turks Head in Saint Agnes on the Isles of Scilly, another ancient pub. I'd come off a long day of sailing, myself and seven others aboard *Annabel J*, a pilot-cutter we sailed from Falmouth. It was my shout – my round – and as I gathered our drinks from the bar I gave the young barmaid a one pound tip.

"And one for you," I said, like they do on *Coronation Street*.

She looked at me, confused. "What's this?" she asked.

"That's for you."

"What for?"

"It's a tip."

She cocked her head.

"A gratuity," I said. "It's for you."

"Huh," she said, and with a look of wonder thanked me and went to tell the guy in the kitchen.

On that same trek, another island, I walked along a low stone bulwark at the edge of a small harbour. English coins in every denomination were neatly laid in a single row, resting loose atop the wall. This carried on for fifty meters – hundreds of pounds worth of coins – an open-air wishing well, talismans to the sea. No one touched or removed the coins, only added more.

I finish up my present pint and set off to wander St Ives' winding streets, past sellers of pasties, fudge, ice cream and art. Music cuts through the drone – amplified acoustic guitar and singing, the voice a hybrid of Jack Johnson and Eddie Vedder. The busker belts out originals until a copper

moves him along. I strike up conversation with the singer as he packs his gear. He's from Devon, and tells me of his visit to Vancouver Island.

Every Brit has a story of visiting Canada – invariably Victoria, Banff and Jasper. I'd like to hear the other side of those stories – all the Canadians putting up English relatives that materialize in summer – relatives they never knew existed, who may in fact be unrelated. With all these freeloaders descending on Canada, who fills Vancouver's hotels? They're always full. It must be the locals, their homes overrun by "relatives." I give the musician my coins and wish him well, wondering when he'll show up at our place for the summer.

With music gone I take in the architecture: stone cottages, clapboard and brick, cobbled streets, breezeways and worn rocky stairs. Monochrome buildings resemble Cornish flags – the black and white of slate and lime, but surrounded in colour – fluffy palms, lichen and moss with whimsical flowers, curtains in windows and the occasional waving piece of bright laundry, no doubt washed in All Tempa-Cheer. A jackdaw grips a chunk of bread and a seagull has a beakful of moss. Nesting's in full swing. Pigeons coo and starlings are rapping out Morse code. More washing flies from lines like bunting. At one home two items hang to dry – a sleeveless undershirt and enormous tighty whities, reminding me of *Summer Rental* – John Candy fashioning a jib from his giant undies to win the sailing regatta.

Beached dories, gigs and luggers tilt on low tide sand. I sit on a jagged stone pier to gaze at water and holiday-makers, everything a plodding pace. A bank of mist rolls in – a billowing drape across St Ives Bay. And within moments the misty curtain's gone, revealing grainy blue-greens and crescents of pulsing white. All this to the sound of sea.

A funeral procession weaves through town in hot sun – cars and people in stifling black and a glass-domed hearse like a train observation car, stuffed with a pale wood coffin. The casket's dressed in bright flowers that look artificial even from here. As the procession passes a bird sings, its call the sound of a descending slide-whistle, colouring the scene in dark comedy.

This place nurtures creativity – surf a tempo, like the rhythm of oars that pulled me here – and I do my best to capture a day:

Midday

Brilliant lemon-yellow sun
reflected on the waves
people eating ice-cream cones
a postcard seaside town
I stand amidst the tourists
enjoying holidays
and then a long black car goes by
somehow without a sound
Its high raised back encased in glass
a body put on show
inside a wooden box with flowers
imitating life
The sun still shines on dancing waves
while ice-cream starts to melt
this seaside town continues on
as travellers depart

Night

A bright, plump moon, a beacon, illuminates our room
dark clouds like dancing waves
surround the lighthouse in the sky
gulls cry, wind howls, relentless, the pounding of the sea
moaning, groaning clapboard – haunting, calming sounds
harmonic light, melodic night, orchestrated fugue
Bravo! Brava! Encore!
the Maestro takes a bow

Morning

That same full moon descends and dims, behind peaked roofs of stone
and birdsong of the morning time takes on a gentle tone
the hazy lunar ball of ivory drops away with night
while steep, bucolic hillsides glow soft green in muted light

Last night's storm has blown away, beyond the Celtic Sea
bright fishing boats and coloured floats now polka-dot the sea
the water's calm, its pulse relaxed, a peaceful rising tide
a new day dawns, as night turns light and quietly subsides

Time here's less frantic than my Oxford assault but I still want to experience as much as possible. Manic perhaps, but fun. I stay on top of the UEFA European Championship – the Euro Finals, following Iceland's Cinderella team defying long odds and driving their country mad with pride. A night of live jazz and another of poetry at Cafe Frug – the passion of Bob Devereux's spoken word, a modern-day bard – to quote artist Pete Giles, "A force of nature."

I take an art walk around town with Pete and we're joined by another local. Today is summer solstice and we're invited to Pete's studio for midsummer's eve – a pagan celebration in the heart of a Christian town. Elsewhere people are gathered in stone circles and temples, doing the same, the magic of ritual. Now, well into nighttime, from atop a hill we watch sun drop into the sea, shimmering gold like a fiery sword from a forge, laid in Atlantic to temper. There's a mottled swirl of dusky orange and purple, darkening horizon, then nothing but an imagined hiss of cooling steel.

Next day Deb and I take the Coast Path east, hiking windswept shore to Godrevy Lighthouse on the Mexico Towans, miles of beach and mountainous dunes. On the shore we pass more bits of shipwreck, revealing themselves at low tide. Skylarks and stonechats bring song to the scenery while admiral, tortoiseshell and silver-studded blue butterflies add flits of vibrancy.

From Hayle, "The Town That Changed the World," birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, we follow streets and path to shoreline cliffs. At the waterline, clumps of seaweed swirl like green hair in a drain and monstrous jellies in purple and blue wobble on hard-packed gold sand.

We trek to Knill's Monument in Steeple Woodland Nature Reserve, following St Michael's Way, and leap-frog by train, rejoining the path at

St Michael's Mount, where a high-masted ship sits in the bay like an old Brixham trawler. We cross the low tide causeway, skirt the castle and climb Mount Gardens, a cliff of subtropical plants and succulents, colour transforming cold rock into celebration. From here I just make out the pilgrimage trail, stretching across the water and heading inland, back from where we came, on to where we're going.

LONDON

London: a map-eating sprawl. A lovely description I've borrowed from writer Tony Horwitz. (I say borrowed because I fully intend to return it.) While Bryson pinpoints it in *The Road to Little Dribbling*, noting, "London isn't a place at all. It's a million little places." Then there's Joseph Addison, taking a different tack, specific and dour. "When I am in a serious Humour, I very often walk by myself in Westminster Abbey where the Gloominess of the Place and the Use to which it is applied … are apt to fill the Mind with a kind of Melancholy, or rather Thoughtfulness, that is not disagreeable."

Arriving in London my humour's none too serious, so I'm uninspired to walk Westminster Abbey alone. But walking London's streets, I admit, does leave a thoughtful melancholy that's not disagreeable. I'm currently worming my way along Oxford Street's packed sidewalks, trying to not lose an eye on passing umbrellas. And I can't help but feel a literary connection with every travelling writer who's been here – Dickens, Doyle, Woolf, Theroux, Chatwin, Badkhen – all melancholy in their way.

Returning to London completes another looping round-knot, cinching laces on my saga. It's been a year since I was here, the leg of adventures that took us around England, Scotland and Iceland, bridging Scandinavian exploration. I've had Viking experiences – eating their food, sailing their waters, reading their literature, meeting their kin and studying those who study them. I even maintained correspondence with a modern Icelandic Viking – Gunnar Þór (Thor) Gunnarsson – a good guy with a great name. Þ is a thorn by the way, used like "Th." You can't get more Nordic Þan Þat.

Here in London my trail's nearing a close. To come: a circuitous North Atlantic trip toward my Holy Grail. If Miklagard, Paris and London were ultimate Viking prizes, so too are Iceland, Greenland and Vinland to my

personal saga. Iceland's a notch in the belt. Greenland and Vinland lie ahead, somewhere through haar-shrouded horizon. But for now I've loose ends to tidy in London, knotting up myth and history.

I start at the Tate Modern – contemporary art in a landmark building, a converted power station shadowing a south bend in the Thames. Not so much Viking as viking. There's a three dimensional map exhibit – London in relief, covering the floor, and I stride through boroughs like a giant, then elevator to the tenth floor bar with a view of St Paul's, antlike pedestrians, and the river. When artist Roni Horn staged her close-up photo exhibit here she asked, "What is that stuff flowing outside the window? It's not water, surely? Water is a clear, colourless, odourless, tasteless liquid. The Thames is none of those things."

This time we're staying in Holborn, a transitional neighbourhood bordering the West End theatre district. Each evening our lobby becomes a party, from cocktail hour jazz to nighttime DJ, as the inviting space fills with good-looking, well-dressed patrons amidst a mashup of tourists, business people and one Viking enthusiast.

Checking things off my London list I start at Stanford's – perhaps the best travel bookstore – where I find another Armitage (signed!), and a chunky Robert Macfarlane – *The Old Ways*, writing for travellers walking their way through the world. *Beowulf* sits stoically on a shelf – flashbacks to high school literature class and a teacher who made it fun. (Thanks, Mr. Worley.) The story – an epic poem and perhaps the first English historical novel – set in Scandinavia, melds fact, fiction and lore. I suspect it inspired Icelandic Sagas, written two to four hundred years later. Legend reinvented abroad before returning home.

I go to the British Museum once more to visit Lewis Chessmen – the walrus ivory carvings bound for Dublin, stranded in the Hebrides eight hundred years ago. Different pieces from those in Edinburgh. Once more I'm enraptured, tiny carved eyes connecting me to that time. I like to believe they're pleased to see me.

Moving on, I weave through the labyrinth to the Sutton Hoo – Anglo-Saxon grave artifacts from sixth- and seventh-century East Anglia, including a regal boat burial. These were pre-Viking English, before the Great Danish Army arrived. Amongst the unearthed goods are an

intricately decorated helmet, shield and sword, gold, jewels, a lyre, and silver from Byzantium.

A small plaque states, “Sutton Hoo is of primary importance to early medieval historians because it sheds light on a period of English history that is on the margin between myth, legend, and historical documentation.” Like so much from the Sagas. The Sutton Hoo display captures time, place and people, almost certainly the basis for *Beowulf* – a missing link to England’s Saxons and Vikings.

The George Inn is my destination for a post-museum pint – a courtyard coach house, one of the last remaining, with tiny lean-up bars scattered throughout the tilting old building. Go through one of its many doors and you’re met with more beer taps and an endless supply of unpleasant servers and punters. But I do what I came for, having a drink in the space that according to Pete Brown was Shakespeare’s local – the original Globe Theatre being around the corner, making The George a satisfying touchstone for lovers of writing and beer. And with a sufficiently wetted whistle, I move on.

Making my way along Bankside, I hear London historian Peter Ackroyd whisper, “You can learn more about the human condition in a voyage along the Thames than on any long journey over the oceans of the world.” But for those searching he cautions, “Tread carefully over the pavements of London for you are treading on skin.”

And I’m aware somewhere beneath my tiring feet a Viking hoard once lay, buried after the Danish occupation in 871, as *Beowulf* claims, “They let the ground keep that ancestral treasure, Gold beneath gravel, gone to earth.” While even greater wealth was hidden just beyond the city, at Croydon and Gravesend, no doubt heaped in Wunderbars.

Crossing the city through time, I’m accompanied by two pivotal players in our saga. Their memories at least, like cornerstones: Kings Olaf I and II of Norway, who I consider the Two Olafs. First we have King Olaf I – Olaf Tryggvason – Olaf Crowbone. Following his conversion to Christianity, Olaf I became the new faith’s staunchest promoter, converting the Orkneys and baptising Leif Erikson, who in turn converted his family in Greenland – the path of conversion mirroring where I’ll go from here. But despite Olaf I’s Christian zeal he maintained traditional Norse beliefs – a devout hybrid, Viking to the core.

Then there's King Olaf II – Olaf Haraldsson – Saint Olaf, the Christian Viking warrior who destroyed London Bridge, severing access for defenders. Using wrought-iron cables strung from longboats to bridge pilings, and timing tide with his army heaving on oars, Olaf II hauled London Bridge down, a cascade of cracking timber crumbling into the Thames. The song, however, wouldn't be written for a few hundred years. Accounts of the bridge's collapse vary. It may well be one of the best urban myths ever. But then again, maybe not. Beyond this, Olaf II's legacy, like that of Olaf I, is faith and waves of conversions. For *this* Olaf II remains Saint Olaf.

Now as I walk through Southwark on another bend in the Thames, I come to his namesake, Saint Olaf House. It has a peekaboo view of London Bridge – the current one, now dwarfed by the other spans sewing the embankments together. Maybe the previous one they shipped to Arizona's more impressive. I can't say. I could find out but can't imagine it being of interest.

While both Olafs went far and wide with their odd blend of viking and Christianizing, it was Olaf Crowbone's travels that were truly global, even by Viking standards. In addition to dealings with Leif Erikson, extending his influence to Iceland and Greenland, Crowbone sailed to Russia to meet with Rus and Wends (Slavs). He went through the Baltic, past Estonia's Salme site, and circumnavigated the British Isles, raiding Scotland, the Hebrides, Ireland, Wales and the Isles of Scilly, a maritime proto-Crusade.

Mulling this I gaze downriver, ebb tide pulling thoughts to the sea. I think of another time I was in Crowbone's wake, plying the North Atlantic and Scillies, scrambling into a survival suit as a force eight gale bore down, feeling beyond remote. In his book *On Celtic Tides,* Chris Duff writes, "Journeys on the ocean are essentially in wilderness." While Samuel Johnson simply states, "Being in a ship is being in a jail, with the chance of being drowned."

The pilot-cutter/jail on which I crewed, awaiting my drowning, heaved endlessly, raised onto high breakers that thrust our boat forward with each wave's collapse like a toy in a tub. For heart-stopping moments we'd crest, until a tumbling wash shoved us surfing into trough after trough at blustery speed, our views alternating from sweeping vistas of blue – ever-

encroaching rollers – to nothing but watery walls rising overhead an arm's length away.

Unlike Crowbone's overlapping clinker ships our cutter was carvel-built – planks flush, the sheer plank (top plank) even with the deck – no railing – just a low lip running the length of the boat. To work rigging in angry breakers at a heavy tack we needed life-lines – soft, belt-like nylon tethers, lashing us to the wave-washed deck. Emotions ranged from adrenaline-pumping highs to gut-wrenching anxiety, remembering knots in violent sea-wash, scrambling to the stern to grab sheets as rollers poured across the bow, dowsing the front half of our boat, a boat that shrank with each growing wave.

Bitter is the wind this night

Which tosses up the ocean's hair so white

Merciless men I need not fear

Who cross from Lothland on an ocean clear

Lothland is the land of the Vikings – Norway, more or less. And this poem, *Tonight I Fear Not the Vikings*, written by Irish monks around 850 AD, basically says the rougher the water, the safer you are from Northmen. That night aboard the cutter our weather, according to the poem, was the type to keep Vikings away. But our first morning at sea, still up from a full night of sailing, we finally faced an "ocean clear," weirdly discomforting in its jarring calmness. We were a long way from home but so was Crowbone when he plied the same waters. No survival suits or lifelines on *his* ships. But for us, along with anxious moments came some of the most stunning views I've witnessed and still see in my mind. After sharing the helm on that draining all-nighter, I saw sun rise in crepuscular sky, a fireball emerging from the sea in our wake. Being a west coaster I rarely see sun rise from the ocean – different energy than sunset – manifestation versus gratitude. "Can you imagine what Matisse would've made of this if he'd seen it?" wrote Robert Hughes in *The Liberation of Sydney*. He could well have been describing that sunrise.

We carried on through Norse and Saxon waters, as much a part of the lethal, real-life chess match played out around England as the muddy battlefields of Reading. Gareth Williams, the British Museum's leading Viking historian, says, "The Vikings raided Cornwall, but they also allied

with the Cornish against West Saxon expansion and Cornwall was an important point on a sailing route from Scandinavia round Scotland to the Irish Sea and on to Brittany. To a great extent the history of the Vikings is the history of their ships and boats and there is nowhere better placed than the National Maritime Museum of Cornwall to tell this story."

Which is where I was, Cornwall's Maritime Museum in Falmouth, to start my turbulent sail around Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. I went to the museum's demonstration pool – a raised indoor lake, complete with islands and buoys, rip currents and winds. On the lake are model sailboats, little sloops with working sails. Standing at the edge of the water with a fixed remote control, you sail your own small boat on the lake, utilizing wind and tides and working your model craft around obstacles. A great exhibit – educational and fun. I learned, quite honestly, as much about sailing as I did in a week-long course in a class and another two weeks on the water.

Richard Jefferies writes in *The Breeze on Beachy Head*, "There is an infinite possibility about the sea. It may do what it has not done before. It is not to be ordered, it may overlap the bounds human observation has fixed for it. It has a potency unfathomable. There is something in it not quite grasped or understood, something still to be discovered." This is how I felt on the water, anticipating things undiscovered.

As our cutter bounced through blue-green like *Sea Stallion*, we watched seals hunt and a sunfish roll its prehistoric girth at the surface. All this while basking sharks lurked below, an eclectic maritime food chain. In the black of night we watched phytoplankton – dinner for the sharks – twinkling like waterborne stars mirroring night sky. As Steffan Hughes writes in *Circle Line*, "To see phosphorescence on that cold summer's night on the Celtic Sea was to feel a benevolent life force slopping onto the boat." Constellations (the real ones) peeked between cloud, shifting monochrome blackness and gray. The sharks, like the monster we watched at Cape Cornwall, move languid in tangy salt sea, unlike the Greenlandic ones we ate in Iceland, dredged from the earth in putrefied urine. On the water we washed down grub with good spirits while the shark soaked in piss we doused with Black Death. I wondered if it was all a cruel joke.

I'm reminded once more of Crowbone, notching his Viking belt with his Saga-worthy journey to Iceland, aiding the island-country's conversion in

1000. An auspicious way to ring in a new millennium. But one particular pagan practice continued after the national move to Christianity – the eating of horseflesh, a ceremonial practice used in the worship of Odin and Thor. Imagine an Indigenous potlach – ceremony with food deemed illegal by new laws and rulers. It carries on anyway. Force doesn't change belief. When asked in Reykjavik by the Icelandic woman at the deli if we were adventurous before she sliced our cured horsemeat I had no idea we were engaging in once-outlawed heathenism.

Snapping shut my mental photo album I'm back on dry land amidst London's frenetic crush where the horsemeat's discreet, hidden in fast-food hamburger. I'm not hungry, so I check my to-dos and make my way to Hyde Park to visit the Speke Monument. John Hanning Speke was the man who found the source of the Nile – a nineteenth-century equivalent to landing on the moon. Proof was difficult. Questions remained. But researching the man and his character convinced me of his quest's success. Speke accompanied Richard Francis Burton – the near-mythic explorer whose reference to departure into the unknown began this saga.

The two men parted ways mid-excursion, their differences irreparable. Burton was immensely popular – a real life action-hero – an adventurer who survived a spear through the face escaping African cannibals. But he was a pompous blowhard as well. Burton's accomplishments are remarkable but it was Speke who quietly went about the business of discovery, surviving even greater odds to break new ground in Africa – succeeding at things even locals wouldn't attempt in his pursuit of anthropological history and geographical knowledge. If Burton was a Turf Tavern – braying and brash – Speke was an Eagle and Child – silent and unquestionably better. And it's Speke I've come here to honour – his life ended too soon, a suspicious and fatal hunting accident on the eve of his propagandized public debate with Burton to settle once and for all who truly conquered the Dark Continent. An obelisk in Hyde Park stands in Speke's honour, as unassuming as the man – tall and quietly proud, uncomplicated and easily missed.

I carry on to the weathered red brick of the Royal Geographical Society – a nod of respect to every explorer. Statues of Ernest Shackleton and David Livingstone stand at the building's perimeter. I smile at missionary-explorer Livingstone, another bookend to a visit I made to

Stanley’s memorial in Belgium commemorating his search for the man, the Welsh reporter finding the Scotsman in the heart of Africa a few years after Speke and Burton were there. Following this it was Stanley who confirmed Speke was right all along, proven true posthumously.

I’m pleased to find the Society building open to the public. It’s late afternoon and will close shortly, but a burly security guard waves me in and a curator gives me a welcoming smile and tells me to enjoy myself before I leave, in no more than fifteen minutes. The open-air courtyard of the Society building has been set up with a temporary photo display – Britain From Above – aerial pictures of national sites: dramatic landscapes, heritage buildings, castles and every kind of hill, field and body of water imaginable. It’s the very best of the country from the air, outsized photos displayed on stepped grassy terraces. Like maps from my trail – the watery Norse frontier in Reykjavik and sweeping reach of Vikings delineated in Roskilde, this series of stunning photos offers another medium – perspective caught in a moment between real and imagined.

A large placard with Michael Palin’s grinning face thanks me for visiting with a tribute to the Society and its place in the world of exploration. I feel I’ve been let into the clubhouse, even briefly, allowed to sit at the grown-up table. Leaving, I exchange waves with the curator and guard and find a pub for supper – The Shakespeare – for a pie and a pint, feeling another bookend to my drink at his local across town.

Arctic

When two courses are open, take the most venturesome.

—Wilfred Grenfell, medical missionary

RETURN TO ICELAND

I never thought I'd write a journal entry beginning with *Back in Iceland*. Last time – the first time – was worthwhile, an enjoyable chore. Not vacation so much as exploration. This time I'll be here twenty-four hours, in and out around supper on consecutive days. I'll spend tomorrow morning at Viking World Museum in Reykjanesbær, a short drive from Keflavik Airport, for a spate of sightseeing and research. And I realize with pleasure the next round of the Euro Championships are happening today – Iceland versus England in the quarters, akin to the Bad News Bears playing the Yankees to see who'll advance to the finals. Thirty thousand Icelanders, ten percent of the population, are in France to watch the match.

My plane from London touches down just before kickoff. I drop my pack at the airport hotel and suss out the TV lounge – a dead, clinical space identical to the common room in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. (This won't do at all.) A cab to town will take too long to arrange and cost too much, so I decide to hoof it the six kilometers into Keflavik to watch the game at the only watering hole – Paddy's Irish Pub. Comforting or tragic, there's *always* an Irish bar. The game will have started by the time I get there, but I'm certain it'll be better than this desolate sanatorium posing as a sitting room.

I head along a stretch of highway with a wide paved shoulder. Sun's high and bright at seven in the evening. I leave the roadway to a patch of mossy rock on a narrow footpath cutting through a field of lupine in rippling waves of purple. Arctic terns dive about overhead – squawking white boomerangs in black skull caps. I carry on, the cry of the birds intensifying, their swoops low and aggressive. Only now it dawns on me in this treeless expanse this lupine's the only feasible nesting ground and I

must be plodding directly through their homes. I'm far enough along I decide to keep going and exude calm. Futile. The screeching's now deafening as the next wave of assault hits. I'm shit at. Or shat at. Regardless, the terns are dive-bombing and crapping at me with unmistakable aim. I've become a Far Side cartoon – the one from a bird's perspective, a red target on my head. Guano's peppering lupine around me in splats like an office skirmish, a no-holds-barred liquid-paper fight. But it's all one-sided. Or back-sided. And like Sir Robin in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, I bravely run away, hoping to not be so covered in shit I can't get into Paddy's.

After sprinting a few hundred meters, as numbness creeps up an arm and I try to recall which side means coronary, the terns retreat. But as I slow to catch my breath a monstrous black-backed gull banks and drops to head height, coming at me like a Spitfire. To which I bravely keep running away, all the way to Keflavik, and suspect I've set a personal best for six K.

The quaint village of fifteen thousand abuts deep blue ocean in Iceland's southwest corner. As I walk into town an enormous cheer erupts, seemingly from everywhere. For a moment I wonder if everyone's as thrilled to see me as the Chessmen were in London, then realize Iceland must've scored. That's to say, we scored. Being caught up in this for the past few weeks I'm as rabid as the locals. There's even a Viking clap – a kind of Icelandic haka – powerful as a war chant.

There's two places to watch the match in town – two public spaces with internet – outside at the soccer field or in the pub. As I draw close I hear a huge collective groan and assume England's scored, but in fact the internet at the field has failed. Now everyone's crushing into the pub – every resident, pressing into a thousand square feet. There's an additional basement with another couple hundred square feet where excess bodies seem to be tumbling into place like lotto balls. I worm into the throng at the front door and find myself pulled along to the bar, my feet leaving the floor every so often in a torrent of humanity.

The energy's intense but lacking the Dodge truck testosterone of North American sport; it's just the pleasant exuberance of passionate, anxious fans. I'm now passing the bar in the river of patrons, never having been so thoroughly touched by strangers. Everyone orders two beers, like the

Icelandair flight. I suppose it would be foolish to do otherwise. The pub doesn't serve food and people arrive with sandwiches and pizzas. In the unlit downstairs, people sit on the floor and a couple of sofas, more or less facing a glowing TV that lights the room in epileptic bursts. It feels like a 1970s house party. I half expect a bottle to be spun for seven minutes in heaven. Twister would be fitting but redundant given the current roomful of knotted limbs.

Fast forward two hours. Iceland wins! Nail-biting excitement becomes relief. With a new apprehension – realization the team's going to the semis, a sense of *now what?* (Good rehearsal, great reviews – hooray! Now we perform on Broadway – oh my god!) In the lull of this weird denouement everyone stares at the TV – that suspended moment before the first burst of thunder.

The live camera on the field in France finds the Icelandic captain, who faces the stands filled with team fans – a blue, white and red face-painted invasion. The rust-bearded warrior, now huge on the screen, lets us focus on him, and together in France and Iceland and who knows where else in the world we open our arms in silence and wait … wait for his signal … until with a guttural shout and smashing of palms in a simultaneous grunting-chant-clap we shout, "HOO!!!" A sound like Thor's hammer striking home. Followed by a hanging pause and again, collectively we shout and clap, "HOO!!!" On it goes, quicker and somehow louder, united – vocalized axes on shields, "HOO!!!" A team and a nation, "HOO!!!" "HOO!!!" "HOO!!!" "HOO!!!" The clap-hoot-chant's now a sea of white-noise. At fever pitch it stops – rowers raising blades – instant, deafening silence. There's a collective intake of breath and a sigh, followed by smiles, a few slapped backs and high fives, then everyone departs.

I could go home satisfied right now, this experience hackle-raising in its intensity. The place is emptying out and despite the hour, it's still bright. I grab pizza to go from the only other place that's open and make my way back on the highway, giving the lupine a wide berth.

I'm buzzing from the night, excited for what's to come – time in the local Viking World, and if all goes according to plan, on to Greenland. I reread the opening lines of Saint Brendan's prayer, which he wrote setting forth on this same route – crossing the Denmark Strait to the Greenland

Sea. “Shall I abandon, O King of mysteries, the soft comforts of home? Shall I turn my back on my native land, and turn my face towards the sea?” If I never imagined being back in Iceland, I *certainly* never thought I’d consider it the soft comforts of home. But that’s what it’s become, more or less. An overpriced bed and reasonably accessible food. Luxury compared to what I may find in Greenland. I look at a map of my destination – a white blob in the Arctic, like tern shit on blue. Granted it’s more than Saint Brendan had to go on, but still a big unknown.

VIKING WORLD

Following breakfast of meat, cheese and bread, I catch the Viking World Museum shuttle – a guy driving a car – and go to Reykjanesbær. At a roundabout we pass a seven-meter granite sword – a sculpture of the Viking sword from Kaldárhöfði, a tenth-century Viking blade found near Lake Úlfljótsvatn.

After a short drive we reach the museum, sitting on the coast with limitless sea view. Plate glass faces the water, drawing outdoors in. And centred in the vaulted atrium is the showcase exhibit – the Viking longship *Islendingur*, a replica of *Gokstad* – twenty-two meters by five in Scandinavian oak, built for an army of seventy. It was constructed by traditional means, shipbuilding like that in Roskilde. Its stained timber has a wave-like flow, both sides supporting round shields – bright painted oak radiating from metal bosses. The whole thing is beautiful and threatening, high dragon-head prow with a snarling, fanged beak. In 2000 she sailed the Atlantic to Newfoundland, to L’Anse aux Meadows, commemorating the millennial anniversary of Leif Erikson’s voyage.

The museum’s quiet and I clamber about the ship in happy solitude. Statues of two sailors sit near the bow. They resemble clergy more than soldiers, tempering the warship’s inherent fierceness. From the deck I look out to the water lapping the Reykjanes Peninsula, imagining a voyage toward the horizon.

In an adjacent room I’m greeted by a map – sea and land west of here, the path of Saint Brendan, Leif Erikson and now me, more or less. Places are marked in their Viking names and translated: Helluland (flat rock land – Baffin Island), Markland (forest land – Labrador), and Vinland (wine land – Newfoundland), with a dot at L’Anse Aux Meadows, my

ultimate destination. The exhibit begins with a quote from *Erik the Red's Saga*, "Leif … finally came upon lands whose existence he had never suspected. There were fields of wild wheat growing there, and vines, and among the trees were maples."

I work my way methodically through the museum's two floors and learn of an archaeological dig at Vogur, site of a turf longhouse, or skáli, here on Iceland's west coast. There's a display of goods found inside: a whale tooth, likely sacrificial, a knife and whetstone, critical to daily life, a kola – a hollowed stone lamp to burn fish oil for light and heat, a stone sinker and harpoon for seal hunting, and a strung-door weight – an ingeniously designed rock on a string that connects to the top of a door to create a self-closing mechanism. Along with household goods are pearls of glass, stone and amber found with the ceramic remains of a cup from the East Balkans – the first ceramic found in Iceland.

There's a detailed model of the L'Anse aux Meadows settlement in miniature – longships and knorrs with rigging and sails and tiny people going about tasks – flensing a whale, drying meat, cutting turf and making ship repairs. The scene feels like premonition, a visual of where I'll end up, finish-line to my saga.

In another area are archaeological items from L'Anse aux Meadows: a door pivot, a birchbark container, ship rivets and jasper – red quartz used to spark fire like flint. The jasper, found in Newfoundland, came from just north of here, at Borgarfjörður. And possibly the most interesting item – a butternut, which quite understandably I mistook for Nutter Butter, candy similar to Wunderbar. But in fact a butternut is a kind of walnut, found only in northeast North America. This was a pivotal find for archaeologists researching the Viking settlement and explorations around L'Anse aux Meadows, as the butternut could only come from further south around modern-day New Brunswick. This wrinkly nut provides proof of Vikings moving around North America south of Newfoundland – voyaging, hunting, gathering and possibly trading.

I take a break for lunch – hearty lamb soup – seated beneath the craning neck of *Islendingur's* dragon-head prow. Then I'm back to the ship, wandering around its elevated base, stopping at interactive desktop computers, each loaded with informative video and schematics of the ship's design. From the hull the keel flares outward, like a widening skate

blade. When the ship reaches top speed this creates a hydrofoil, the splash of waves forcing air under the ship, creating a hydroplane. Builder Gunnar Eggertsson's construction is identical to the original *Gokstad*, showing that Norse shipbuilders created hydrofoil technology a thousand years ago. Top speed of the longship exceeds that of most modern sailing craft, even greater than our pilot-cutter when we surfed down huge waves with a tailwind. *Islendingur's* rudder – her steer board – also boasts ingenious design with a gentle outward curve, flat to the ship, rounded to the waves, streamlined against drag and optimizing push and pull of the helmsman, while a high, wave cutting prow kept water from breaking over the deck. Viking shipbuilding – advanced, intuitive and artisanal – remains a staggering composite of seafaring know-how.

In another room is an exhibit called Finding Vinland – the story of Norwegian archaeologist Anne Ingstad, her explorer husband Helge, and their discovery of the Norse settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows. Further exhibits wrap around the room, another polar map – East Meets West – migration of the Inuit meeting that of Scandinavians. For the Norse and North American Natives, quests were no different – the continuous search for game, ivory, hides and wood. As Leif Erikson was sailing west from Greenland, the Thule – ancestors of Inuit and Greenlandic Natives – moved east across what's now Alaska and northern Canada. The eventual meeting of Arctic travellers was inevitable. *Erik the Red's Saga* describes an early encounter: "One morning they noticed nine hide-covered boats and the people in them … were short in height with threatening features and tangled hair on their heads." This coming from a people for whom well-groomed hair was paramount – combs surface at Viking archaeological sites as much as any household item.

I peruse a display of Norse mythology – how Odin, god of war and ruler of Valhalla, mounted on his eight-legged steed Sleipnir, sacrificed his eye to acquire wisdom from the giants. For nine nights he hung from the World Tree – Yggdrasil – learning of runes and poetry, the basis for the sacrifices of nine at the Temple in Uppsala.

I read of Thor, battling those same giants and the Midgard Serpent that encircles the Earth. Passages include an overview of Norns, Valkyries and Völvas – Norns being rulers of fate, controlling destiny. In the *Völuspá*, Snorri Sturluson writes that the three most important are Urðr, Verðandi

and Skuld. Norns appear in the Norse Story of Creation as protectors of the apples, spinning lives like thread at the foot of Yggdrasil, its roots "writhing into the bedrock of creation." The Valkyries – Wand-Maid, Battle-Maid and Brandisher-of-Spears, those from Wagner's orchestral Flight, are often associated with Norns. And we have Völvas – seers, like Litil from the Saga Museum, mankind's channel to the realm of gods and destiny, akin to steamy bakeshop windows where curious and hungry peer, hoping to glimpse what's in store.

And I learn about Jomsvikings – an order of Viking mercenaries from the tenth and eleventh centuries, blending history and legend through mythic poetry. The *Jómsvíkinga Saga* is their story, also referenced in the *Saga of King Olaf Tryggvason*. While Scandinavia was converting to Christianity, Jomsvikings were staunchly pagan, worshipping Odin and Thor. But they were primarily for hire, at times fighting for Christian rulers. These Vikings maintained strict codes of near-chivalric conduct and are considered the basis of Christian Crusaders.

Jomsvikings hailed from the south Baltic, a headquarters called Jomsborg. The exact location remains a mystery. Still heavily debated, it's believed to be Poland or Germany's north coast. References to Jomsborg appear in Middle Age German and Danish records, tantalizingly specific yet vague. Another reference is carved into the Hällestad Rune Stones – three stones in the walls of Hällestad Church in Skåne, Sweden, home of Red Orm from *The Long Ships*. The rune stones memorialize warriors who fell in 985 at the Battle of Fýrisvellir, a legendary fight near Uppsala between Jomsviking Styrbjörn the Strong and Eric the Victorious, King of Sweden. I don't need to tell you who won.

The most comprehensive references to Jomsvikings come from twelfth- and thirteenth-century Icelandic texts, particularly the *Flatey Book* – medieval Iceland's largest manuscript. It contains Sagas of Norse kings found in the *Heimskringla*, where Olaf Crowbone features prominently. And while the *Flatey Book*'s valuable in that it recaps Sagas – a medieval Coles Notes – it also contains in-depth records that appear nowhere else. Examples of this are the Norse poem, or edda, *Hyndluljóð* – *The Creation Story*, as well as snippets from the *Grœnlendinga Saga* with a different account of Vinland than that found in *Eiríks Saga*. (Meanwhile, *Codex Vaticanus – The Vatican Manuscripts*, include detailed records of North

America from the *tenth* century, a hundred years *before* Leif Erickson arrived, leaving us to speculate.)

The exhaustive *Flatey Book* also contains the only Icelandic version of the *Orkneyinga Saga* – *History of the Orkney Islanders* and a short story called *Völsa þáttr*, relaying an account of a pagan ritual where two men lift the lady of the house above the doorframe to look into the otherworld, a seer-like funereal experience also recorded by Ahmad ibn Fadlan when he witnessed the Rus Viking boat-burning.

Finally making my way from the museum, I descend wooden stairs and pass another stone replica of the sword from Kaldárhöfði, this one regular size, thrust into a bit of raised floor. Of course I want to free it and become King of England. But I'm not sure I'm up for all that goes with it – sending cards to hundred-year-olds and posing for stamps. So instead I take the shuttle back and visit once more with the driver who delivered me this morning. As we drive he points out where he lives and describes annual getaways with his wife to the Canary Islands.

"We go in February," he says in a dancing Icelandic accent. "When we need it most. In the cold and the dark."

ICELAND TO GREENLAND

At the hotel I grab my pack and cross soggy grass to the airport. My flight to Greenland's on Air Iceland. Not Icelandair. Not Greenland Air. Air Iceland. From Reykjavik International Airport. Which is in Keflavik. Not to be confused with Reykjavik Airport in Reykjavik, which is also international. The two airports service different destinations; most times, but not always. I know this because I've been working on this excursion for two years, having given up more than once, trying to travel on a flight that goes semi-weekly, with limited, seasonal destinations. You either get there from here or from Copenhagen. And I'm going to Greenland's southern tip on the west side of the country, called, naturally, the Eastern Settlements. It makes the whole "Mainland Island, island on the mainland" thing seem straightforward.

Reykjavik International Airport's modest and grossly undersized. Now a busy layover hub, its infrastructure no longer accommodates the perpetual crush of travellers. I struggle ahead to read the check-ins board – dozens

of Icelandair kiosks listed, a few Lufthansa, and one line on the board for Air Iceland, with no numbered kiosk assigned. There's nothing else indicating Air Iceland. No signage. Nothing. So I find an info host, jostle through the crowd like a pinball, and ask her to point me to the Air Iceland kiosk.

She smiles and points to Icelandair.

"Thanks, but not Icelandair. Air Iceland."

She frowns. Shakes her head. "No Air Iceland here," she says. "Just Icelandair."

I remain patient and let her know the airline does, in fact, fly from here. It's just not visible anywhere, other than a blank line on the check-ins board. Not the departures board, you understand. There's absolutely nothing there. But for now all I need's the place to check in and drop my bag.

"Hm," she says. "Someone at Icelandair will know. Go through and talk to them."

So I do. And with more frowns and head-shakes the Icelandair staff make it clear to me no such thing exists. Then the Icelandair boss arrives on the scene to straighten things out.

"Where are you flying?" she asks.

"Greenland."

"Ah, you want Greenland Air."

"No, Air Iceland," I say.

"Well, where are you flying in Greenland?" she says, determined to get to the bottom of this.

"Narsarsuaq," I say.

"Oh!" she says, now seeing everything perfectly. "You mean Narsaq!"

Fortunately I know both these places.

"No, Narsarsuaq," I repeat.

"Not from this airport you're not," she states with finality.

"Well, yes, in fact I am flying from here. To Narsarsuaq. On Air Iceland," I add redundantly, feeling seeds of doubt. And that's when I see what can only be described as pity in her eyes, a realization I need more

help than she can possibly provide. (Cut to file footage of my head bobbing spastically at the Rose and Crown in York.)

“Well, why don’t you go ask at the Lufthansa desk?” she says in a tone you use for a puppy. A puppy with a limp. That’s just pissed on the only spot of carpet not covered in newspaper.

Properly condescended *and* scolded, I limp my wet way to Lufthansa, where I’m helped by a particularly lovely woman.

“Oh yes,” she says. “I can check you in here.”

“Do you have a codeshare with Air Iceland?”

“No,” she says.

“And Icelandair?” I say.

“Well, someone over there should’ve known,” she says with a smile and shrug, lifting her chin at Icelandair. “But don’t worry, there’ll be a plane. And we’ll get your bag on it.”

I thank her, take my checked bag to a drop area, and wander toward security, hoping for the best, still unsure who’s on first.

I kill time and visit with Petie and Koos, a Dutch couple I’ll end up running into repeatedly, a local named Oolis, a young man from a one-church Cumbrian hamlet and a guy from “New York and Philly,” as he puts it, on his way to sell shoes in Paris.

Eventually my Air Iceland flight appears on a departures board and I feel a glimmer of optimism. The gate’s down some stairs through a hallway, where the corridor ends in a solitary door. A suited woman’s at a standing desk, fussing with paper and ignoring a small cluster of questioning passengers. I join the cluster, all of us comparing boarding passes, uncertain.

The woman finishes stacking her paper into a tidy pile and looks up as we fall into a loose queue. Then she smiles, explains she doesn’t work for the airline, and walks away. There’s a collective raising of eyebrows amongst our group, now wondering what’s to come. And almost on cue an actual plane marked Air Iceland rolls up, about fifty meters away. The plane door opens, an attendant leans out and waves our group toward her. With a few more questioning shrugs our eclectic posse straggles out to the tarmac.

“You going to Greenland?” someone asks the woman leaning from the plane.

“Yes.”

“Narsarsuaq, Greenland?” someone else adds.

She smiles, nods, and we climb aboard.

GREENLAND

According to an out-of-print guidebook, “When you’ve seen the world, there’s always Greenland.” Which makes me smile. Pretentious and exciting. I leave Iceland in a spatter of cold rain that hugs the coast, “a chilling drizzle called sea fret,” in the words of Robert Macfarlane. Sun gets coy behind cloud, avoiding the world like Iceland’s Hidden People. A skittish takeoff lifts our prop-plane over Keflavik, compact low-rises in every colour, its harbour enclosed in a dusky breakwater. I pick out Viking World Museum and the tundra-like field where I walked then ran on worn footpath. This scene pulls away, fading out as the plane eases into blinding, tissuey cloud the colour of eggshell under high wattage bulbs.

Adjusting gear at my feet I realize my hands are now hennaed from a cheaply made orange plastic bag of duty-free beer. I give them a scrub to no avail and wonder if it’s permanent. Taking in my surroundings I notice fellow travellers have changed – blue eyes now brown, fair complexions darkened to olive and caramel. Conversation sounds have morphed as well – chattering sing-song and staggeringly long Scandinavian words have shifted to throaty slurring over tongues – brevity and coarse staccato, exotic and pleasing to the ear, a sound like ravens speaking. Outside, cumulus loses definition, tearing into fluffs, while below, a hazy field resembles shallow sea with cloud in haphazard ribbons – the look of a cruise-ship launching to great fanfare. Another swirl looks galaxial, then sky becomes nothing but white.

Passengers are laden with shopping, duty-free and sweets – a feel of excitement in recycled air – Greenlanders going home with treats from abroad. Our flight attendant’s name is Edda, Norse for poetry. Having grown impatient with some exuberant teens, all demanding pillows for the three-hour flight, Edda throws two armfuls at them, pelting two kids in the face.

Bouncing through increasing turbulence my note-taking deteriorates to illegible scribbles. I hope nothing brilliant's lost, knowing the odds are quite good. Well into our rumbling flight I catch a glimpse of Greenland, the southwest tip of the world's largest island, misty water and frosty blue fjord. In *The Arctic Grail*, Pierre Berton quotes nineteenth-century explorer Elisha Kane, who called Greenland's coast "a mysterious region of terrors – never still, never silent."

The plane banks over our destination – Narsarsuaq, Greenlandic for Great Plain – and aims for an old military runway at the head of Erik's Fjord. We're two hundred kilometers north of Cape Farewell, the feeling shudderingly remote. There's the airstrip, a few small buildings and very little else, surrounded by mountain, rock and icy water. Save for the runway, no different than when Erik Thorvaldsson – Erik the Red – was here.

He came to Greenland from Iceland in 982. The massive new island to the west was sighted previously by other Norse sailors but Erik, under banishment from Iceland, came to stay, establishing a settlement in Qassiarsuk, or Brattahlid, just across the fjord from Narsarsuaq. Three years later, the term of his banishment served, Erik returned to Iceland, where he recruited new would-be settlers to return with him. In perhaps the first case of bait-and-switch marketing, he cleverly named his home "Greenland" to appeal to suckers in Iceland. And in 985, with ships, resources and new settlers (suckers), Erik returned.

The Graenlendinga Saga describes events through the next generation: "A number of Icelandic families emigrated there. It's a wild place and remote, the interior uninhabitable because it's permanently covered in ice; but there's good grazing land in some areas up the west coast … There's only a month or two each summer when it's safe for ships to make the journey to Greenland … I managed to find hospitality at Brattahlid Farm on Eriksfjord. It belongs to a man known as Leif the Lucky, son of Eirik the Red. Eirik was the man who discovered Greenland and led the first settlers there. In his youth he was a violent man, twice outlawed for murder, but he made good in the end. Leif is completely different from his father, generous and likable, and offers open house to anyone who needs lodgings … There was a lot of excited talk going round Eiriksfjord about a mysterious country that lay even further west over the sea from Greenland

… discovered by Bjarni Herjolfsson, an Icelandic merchant. ‘The land most definitely exists,’ Leif agreed. ‘And it seems to be huge … The rivers and sea were teeming with fish, there were loads of edible berries just ripe for picking, and there was plenty of game, including animals we’d never seen before. We built some huts and spent the winter there.’”

The mysterious country they refer to is Vinland, further referenced in the Sagas *Landnamabok* and *Islendindingabok*. And in 1075 Adam of Bremen, our prolific German chronicler, also wrote of the voyage from Greenland to Newfoundland, stating, “He spoke of yet another island of the many found in that ocean: it is called Wineland because vines producing excellent wine grow wild there. That unsown crops also abound on that island we have ascertained not from fabulous reports but from the trustworthy relation of the Danes.”

Once more our plane banks steeply and I get my first good view of icebergs, what Saint Brendan called “floating crystal castles, the colour of silver veils.” Which they are, while others are the vibrant blue of freezer-packs, floating like roughly cut sapphires. With a roar and a bounce our plane touches down to applause from the pillowy teens. We pick up bags – no customs clearance, just a beagle that weaves amongst us, sniffing everything, before returning to its master, a guy in uniform. Nothing’s said, and people disperse.

Ancient Greeks had a map, the *Carta Marina*, with an island marked Thule, the same label given those northern nomads whose descendants frightened Vikings with their unkempt hair. Thule – people and place – represents Earth’s outer limit. For the Greeks it referenced a northern land beyond Orkney, possibly Iceland or Greenland. The map, rich with illumination, places the mystery island between spouting sea monsters and ice floes. In 325 BC, Pytheas, a Greek explorer, sailed further still, pushing the limits of exploration to Ultima Thule – approaching the unknown. If the People’s Saga – the Creation Story – occurs at the edge of the world, then what lies beyond can only be nondum cognita – not yet known. But for the past hundred years there’s been a point on the map – current maps, tiny yet significant. Another place called Thule. It’s here,

across a glacier from where I am now. Myth and Sagas indicate it's beyond the world's borders, placing me on its doorstep. Maybe this is where wayward ships plummet from the edge of the Earth. Maybe here there be dragons.

It's a bleak evening – cold fog and low cloud, threatening rain. But I'm keen to explore so I drop my bag and head out. My accommodation, technically a hotel, is a narrow two-storey structure in red at the base of a mountain, the one I intend to climb. From a short stretch of paved road (I can see both ends at once) I join a faint trail leading up, cutting through a demonstration forest, the only treed patch around – the Greenlandic Arboretum, *Arboretum Groenlandicum* – a sample of every bush and tree found on the alpine and arctic tree-lines in the Northern Hemisphere. Started in the 1980s as a trial plantation, it now covers two hundred hectares – a thriving experiment to expand flora from the occasional indigenous willow, birch and scrawny rowan found here. Sea fret – that chill maritime drizzle – is hanging over me like a gloomy thought bubble. I continue on overgrown trail, switch-backing up steep rocky soil with tall wet grass and low tree-limbs reaching over the path. Ducking and pushing branches aside, I climb soggy moss from taiga to tundra – treed to treeless – and reach the first of two plateaus with views of ice-cloven, weather-worn rock.

Behind me is Erik's Fjord, a mix of icebergs in ivory and blue. Beyond, over another ridge, lies more water – whether lake or sea, I can't tell. The next plateau – the summit – now hides in viscous fog that's slowly blanketing the mountain. Climbing further would be foolish. The trail back will be tough enough to pick up and I don't know how long light will hold. Sun's up there somewhere, but here, at nine in the evening, twilight's nothing but thick muddy cloud.

I make my way down uneventfully. Looking back, sure enough, ugly overcast now covers the first summit I just left. From the short stretch of road, slightly hidden from view, I spot a large metal door set into the mountain – something plucked from Middle Earth, gateway to Dwarvish Mines. The door's ajar, beckoning. I make some noise and approach through long scrub grass, wondering what might be in there. Nothing happens. I make more noise, then peer inside. It's hellishly dark. I shine my phone flashlight inside. The beam's swallowed immediately. As my

eyes adjust I’m able to make out a large chamber with raised ceiling, all natural rock, tapering deep into the mountain. I back out and walk a bit briskly back to the imagined safety of the road.

I learn that it’s a bunker – one of many – from when this was an American airbase during World War II and the Korean War. Shelters were carved into mountain rock and served as infirmaries. Critically wounded were brought to Greenland in the American government’s attempt to conceal devastating injuries the military incurred overseas. The army purported this aided convalescence prior to soldiers returning home, when in fact maimed veterans were being hidden, until when I’m loath to consider.

Back in my little room, thick with old paint and stale cigarette, I strip off wet clothing and open the window until bugs come in, then seal up for the night. I rummage through rations I bought in Iceland – beef jerky, dried haddock, chips and cheese crackers. Still resembling a Cheetos junkie or someone who soaks their hands in carrot juice, I carry some snacks to the lobby – the only space with soft furniture and somewhat fresher air – and sip a can of my duty-free beer – Viking Beer, from the bleeding orange bag.

A handful of youths hang out nearby, visiting their friend working reception. Two teens take turns playing an acoustic guitar. The music and vocals are good, atmospheric company to wind down the day. I glance at notes I copied from a reference book, setting a tone for time here: “Norsemen started settling southern Greenland in 985 led by Eirik the Red. Two settlements were established, one along the fjords of the south coast and another on the west coast. An abundant hunting area further north was also frequented. For almost 500 years, a small but hardy Norse community raised farm animals, traded with Europe, built churches, and hunted marine mammals from this farthest outpost of European society. But by 1385, the population was steadily declining, and by 1415, the Norse civilization had disappeared.” Across the room the teens slowly depart, one by one, and guitar fades away – the sound of vanishing Vikings.

QASSIARSUK – BRATTAHLÍÐ

Mountains ringing the fjord are vibrant red, green and tawny this morning – Kodachrome colour so deep it's distorting, a Greenlandic trompe l'oeil. A small black and white arrivals-departures screen flickers in the hotel lobby – no flights for another three days. Upstairs for breakfast I choose from a buffet of meat and cheese, warm yoghurt and briefly boiled eggs – I'd guess two minutes in the water. There's a crusty loaf of fresh bread with a knife, packets of jam and strong drip coffee. What grabs my attention is locals tap their salt and pepper rather than shake, a two handed procedure for each shaker. *Tap-tap-tap-tap* penetrates the room – the tiniest drum band.

A man's wearing a tee shirt from the Danish Vikingskipmuseet – the museum with the Viking world map outside Copenhagen. I smile and comment.

"Yes, we are on an expedition," he says.

I tell him I've been there.

"Please, come and join us," he says, indicating a table where another man's seated. "I am Joern-Ove and this is Gregers. Please, please." He swings a third chair to their small table and we cram in while Gregers grabs a pot of coffee and pours.

The men are volunteer sailors from Roskilde, part of a group of eight from the Vikingskipmuseet – an experiment in living archaeology. Both have crewed the *Sea Stallion* – the longship repeatedly rearing its dragon-head in our saga – Gregers having sailed from Roskilde to Dublin around Orkney and Scotland, while Joern-Ove sailed across Northern Germany. Their current expedition will be six weeks aboard the longship *Skjoldungen*, an eleven by two-and-a-half meter replica of *Skuldelev*, which they'll sail from Nanortalik to Qaqortoq, then on to Narsaq and Paamiut, finishing their journey in Nuuk. Writing this down as we visit, I ask the men how their names are spelled.

Joern-Ove is German, a long term Danish resident. He's a military man. And in clipped, efficient English rattles off, "Joern-Ove. Juliet-Oscar-Echo-Romeo-November-Oscar-Victor-Echo." Steffan Hughes refers to this coding as "Serious. Man stuff. It encourages a clipped form of communication about important things and brings a bit of the fighter pilot out in any sailor, even if he is dressed in yachtsman's pink." I frantically

start writing – every word – before realizing what he's saying, and need him to repeat it twice more.

Third time around he says. "Juliet-Oscar is fine."

"Thanks, Juliet-Oscar," I say, somewhat flustered.

"No. Just J-O," he says.

"Ah. Got it," I say. Then add, "J-O," to show that I do.

J-O continues, "And Gregers is Golf-Romeo-Echo –"

Gregers interrupts. "G-R-E-G-E-R-S," he says with a smile.

All three of us are due to catch a small boat, one of several used to haul people and goods between settlements. I tell them I'm going to Brattahlid.

"We were going to Brattahlid too," J-O deadpans. "But we heard there's a weird Canadian guy so we're going to Igaliku instead." The talker of the two, J-O tells me of his German beer guild, then asks about my travels. I tell him where I've come from, around England, and ask if he's been. "England?!" he says, "No, we only go there for war."

Then he talks about his passion for trains, and I describe the steam locomotive we saw in Devon, to which he replies, "I'm a Diesel Man," somehow making it clear Diesel and Man are both capitalized, and steam is stupid.

A rusty red van shuttles us to the harbour jetty, a few kilometers down the road. The seats have no padding, there's a gaping hole in the floorboard, and a thick wrap of duct-tape holds both clutch and brake pedals in place. Klaus is our driver and skipper, to haul us across the fjord to our respective stops. We jump from the van to a Targa 25 named *Kassoq*, meaning Ice Floe. Squat and reliable, Targas were built in the 1970s, a nautical workhorse known as the ugly duckling amongst boaters. Leaping aboard after us, Klaus levers the throttle to its full twenty-five knots, tearing us into the fjord and maneuvering through icebergs like an obstacle course.

"Ever hit an iceberg?" J-O asks.

"Oh yes," Klaus replies. "Many times."

The day's overcast – misty and cold. Ragged icebergs heave around us like blue lead-crystal and I imagine what lies below.

“We’re sailors too,” J-O says, leaning forward from his seat behind Klaus.

Klaus makes a noncommittal sound as we bump along, an occasional flick of windscreen wipers on the front of our little cabin.

“What’s your room number?” Gregers asks me.

“101.”

“We’re in 105. We have a bottle of rum.”

“I have four beers.”

“That’s a party,” Klaus says flatly.

Eventually I’m dropped at a pier – weathered wood on milky water – and Klaus indicates someone’ll come back for me in the afternoon. Not sure who or when. An exercise in trust, I decide, and self-reliance if need be. Once more he jams the throttle to full and roars away into the mist, leaving me in icy damp. With a shiver I cinch my collar and climb a wet slipway to Brattahlid.

In *The Frozen Echo* Kirsten Seaver writes, “Erik the Red built his chieftain’s seat at Brattahlíð (Steep Slope) in prime pastureland on the western shore of the inner Eiriksfjord, or Tunulliarfik as it is now called.” What lies before me is a shed-like building, homes for two dozen residents – sheep farm workers – and endless grazing land, although no livestock’s in sight. No people either. Surrounding hills and water are drenched in foggy rain. I’m cold and alone amidst sharp green crags and drifting icebergs. But this place is why I’m here – home of Erik the Red and his wife Thjodhildr, following his expulsion from Iceland.

When he sailed here, homeland conversion was in full swing under Bluetooth, but Erik clung to his belief in the old gods. And in what would otherwise be a great sit-com setup, a Nordic Tony and Angela in *Who’s the Jarl?*, trendy Thjodhildr was devoutly Christian.

“Build me a church,” she demanded of Erik.

“No,” he replied. (I imagine him barely letting her finish, and a studio audience cracking up.)

To which Thjodhildr cut Erik off, casting him from their marital bed. I’d say he was forced to sleep on the sofa but it was all one big multipurpose platform, so exactly where Erik slept is unclear. But not the rest of the

story, or Thjodhildr's insistence. The Sagas document all of it, in detail. Perhaps a first for Christian bargaining chips but effective none the less – tit for tat you might say. Or vice versa. Regardless, Erik eventually built Thjodhildr her church – a happy ending, you could say, for both.

Those building ruins are here – the farmstead longhouse and church – now subtle bumps in already lumpy land, beneath tufts of tussock. There's no interpretive centre, no signage, no demands to *Stand Back* or *Keep Off*. It's easy to miss, which strikes me as pure – archaeological remains left to the elements, here for an explorer to discover. Or not. I'm armed with a photocopy of a hand-drawn map with no scale – something an ailing pirate might scribble to direct an heir to buried treasure. Which it does, more or less. Leading me in a quizzical way to another X-marked spot in our saga.

While the ruins are nothing more than a vague hint of foundation under turf, reconstructed replicas stand nearby – both the longhouse and Thjodhildr's tiny church, which looks like an alpine fort or human-sized doll house. But a short distance away on a low cliff hangs something even more fascinating. Bronze art – patterns and outlines – molded onto the sheer rock. There's a dragon-ship prow, sun and moon, a cross, a likeness of Erik and Thjodhildr, and a bird – possibly Hræsvelgr, the eagle atop Yggdrasil. These bronze shapes, now patina, at first seem haphazard, until you look closely. After a while I see it – the line art includes an interpretation of Erik's farmstead, the grassy ridges I've been walking around. This eclectic array of bronze is the story of this place – history in pictograms – rune lines and hieroglyphs reinvented in contemporary sculpture.

I traipse up an incline of mud to the reconstructed longhouse and tug on the wooden door's iron handle. It doesn't budge, secured by a heavy medieval lock, the likes of which we saw in Reykjavik's Settlement Museum. I walk around the building, getting soaked in bushy grass, and confirm there's only one door and it's indeed securely locked. I'm sure it's supposed to be accessible.

I fish through my pack and sure enough find a tiny entry ticket – a voucher the size of a stamp, given to me when I landed. It's stapled to a sheet of paper confirming my passage here on Klaus's Targa. I check my phone and remarkably have a signal – one bar of service. And I call Jacky,

the Danish-Frenchman who runs Blue Ice Explorers, a service provider for travellers and tourists. He's a local entrepreneur who ensures boats are running, offers rooms in a hostel and operates a coffee shack in Narsarsuaq. He's effectively a fixer, now living in Narsarsuaq after coming to Greenland for one year which turned into forty. Jacky answers on the third ring. I tell him where I am and ask if the longhouse is accessible.

"Hm," he says. "There should be someone with keys. I'll make a call."

So I carry on exploring, finding a small hole in the earth – a black circle I'd expect Wile E. Coyote to place on the ground for the Roadrunner to fall into. It sits on a grassy rise just off the rocky beach. A small sign indicates it's the entryway to a Bronze Age Greenlandic (Inuit) turf home – a sod-roof cave-home dug in the earth thirty-five hundred years ago. I peek in, the space as black and unnerving as the infirmary in the cliff. If it collapsed I doubt I'd be found

Then I hear the faint sound of an ATV. It grows, and as I look to the noise, across rolling lumps of land I see a Border Collie running toward me like a rocket. And a few seconds later I see the quad, lurching over each rise like a ship on waves. I'd experience this twice more around Greenland. First hearing an ATV, then seeing a sheepdog running at cheetah-like speed, and only *then*, after a short while, seeing an ATV and rider appear in the distance.

The dog sniffs around me and wags a tail, moving constantly. A Native Greenlander in a heavy parka climbs off the quad and approaches, eyes smiling.

"I was hoping to get into the longhouse," I say rather obviously.

He nods. "Cold today," he says.

I tell him I agree.

He takes off thick gloves and pulls out a huge iron ring of three massive keys – something from the Wizard of Id – medieval jailor keys, each the size of a forearm. He flips through them like he's coming home, selects one, and then pauses.

"Ticket?" he says.

I dig out my piece of stapled paper, loving the lunacy of this but appreciating the professionalism. He takes it from me, gingerly tears the tiny voucher from my paper, and hands the larger piece back to me. Then he unlocks the old-fashioned deadbolt with a heavy *ka-chunk* and lets me into the longhouse.

The space smells of wood and wool. Period pieces stock the space – clothing and tools, cookware and firewood. The man with the keys, whom I've dubbed The Jailor, stands back to let me look through the compact space and its contents. His cell phone rings and he steps outside to take the call. I hear him making sounds of agreement, every possible vocal version of nodding.

I finish looking around and step back out. He's still on his call, making more sounds of acknowledgement, never uttering an actual word. This goes on a very long time. I look around at the view and the teeny church, which has a cut log end resembling a face – two natural knots in the wood like slightly off eyes, hammered doweling in place of a nose, and a downcast cut in the curving grain that gives it the saddest expression imaginable. I wonder if it was happy before being chopped to make a church. I do my best to play with the dog but it just wants to run.

Finally, after more grunts of agreement, The Jailor hangs up, shakes his head and says in a slow voice, "Crazy."

I smile and nod, understanding without knowing details.

"Cold today," he adds.

I make a sound like he did on the phone, then nod and add, "What's your dog's name?"

He thinks about it, then shrugs. "Don't know his name. Sheepdog?"

I smile and try to nod in a new way, in the hope of appearing to have more to offer. We're both silent a while. Sheepdog's clearly bored.

"Cold today."

And with that The Jailor tucks the giant keys into his parka and climbs on the quad as Sheepdog races off the way they came.

Near the Bronze Age cave-dwelling, which I now notice is labeled "Eskimo home," I find another semi-submerged shelter, this one constructed in equal parts wood, earth and stone, likely built in the last

hundred years. There's a crawl-space entryway like a doggie door, and by getting onto all fours I'm able to scramble inside, out of the freezing rain. There's a tiny glass window that faces the water where more icebergs drift, and another long, below ground tunnel to enter from the side – an elongated igloo-style entrance scraped into the soil.

Inside is a tamped earth bench. By stooping I can almost sit up. I settle in, somewhat, and pull my Icelandic snacks from a pack. The beef jerky's tasty, the dried haddock the opposite – somehow fishy and bland at the same time. I think of an exchange from *The Detectorists*.

"What is it?" Andy asks, as Lance slides him a bowl of food.

"Curry Surprise."

"What's the surprise?"

"How bland it is."

Andy tastes it. "Mm, that *is* bland. Now I wish you hadn't told me."

I do my best to stay hydrated and despite the nasty weather slop on some sunscreen. With air so pure – in part what makes scenery stunning – sunburns can take you by surprise. Between snacking, applying sunscreen and taking photos, I'm forced to keep putting gloves on as fingers go from frigid to numb. (Cold today.)

Through the rain-streaked window I watch ice move on the inlet as I chew shreds of protein like cud, and try my best to stay warm. While I rub feeling into my hands, rain abates and weather takes a promising turn. Dark nimbus moves past the fjord, replaced by streaky sunshine and patchy blue. It feels like spring after a long winter, and I crawl from my subterranean lair like Punxsutawney Phil.

High on a cliff behind the settlement stands a statue of Leif Erikson. The famous explorer seems to get more recognition than his murderous dad who founded the place. There's a roughly worn track in the grass along with a few stone steps and anchored rope, which I follow up the embankment. I pass a slab of coral-coloured granite etched with red runes like the one in Oxford's Ashmolean. This one, resting on a hill by a fjord, oozes energy, something unattainable in the museum – a beast on the Serengeti versus one in a zoo.

The land rises in tilting terraces, as though I'm ascending levels toward some kind of enlightenment. Soon the rope ends, along with the footpath and rock stairs, and once more I'm scrambling up a series of earthen banks until I reach the outsized statue of Leif. Another bronze, it's weathered and green, reminiscent of the land. Leif holds an axe, facing the fjord named for his father. A plaque's set into the plinth and reads, "Leif Erikson from Brattahlid. He led the way." I just know he's thinking about Newfoundland.

Clouds part and the fjord changes colour, shifting to aqua and green. The place has become welcoming in time for me to leave. With a nod to Leif I start down, descending to the water, wondering if there'll be a boat.

Eventually a boat does arrive, screaming across the fjord to retrieve me. I'm shuttled back to my room and immediately struck by some kind of illness that's shocking in its intensity. I flop on the bed and instantly fall into feverish, sweaty sleep. I wake in time to reenact scenes from *Bridesmaids*, then back to bed for another wave of violent, fitful sleep. And repeat. And repeat. Through this I manage to crawl into pajamas which are soon saturated in sweat as I shiver under stacked quilts, wondering if I've somehow contracted malaria.

I dump open my little kit of travel remedies, reading labels and struggling with the print, tiny and blurry to my eyes. If Odin gained wisdom by losing half his sight, I wonder how far along I am. I take photos of directions and enlarge them to read. Remedies for my ailments don't coincide. "Take this for this, unless suffering from that." "Don't take this with that." "If you've taken this for that, *definitely* don't take any more of this," and so on. In other words, decide *which* ailment's frightening you the most and do a little something about it, otherwise, see your physician. It's now Tuesday afternoon and the only medical care is a nurse who flies in for two hours a week on Thursday afternoons, weather permitting. So I need to survive another forty-eight hours. I consider texting Deb – tell her I love her, and if I don't make it back to promise me she'll never love again. And remind her how good she looks in black.

At six PM there's a knock. It's J-O and Gregers. I stagger to the door and open it. One look and their faces blanch, visibly repulsed. I imagine them slapping black paint on my door and hanging a sign, *Plague: Keep Away*.

“We’re climbing Signal Hill and wanted to see if you want to come along,” J-O says.

“Thanks,” I cough. “But I got a lot of shit to catch up on. Not to mention vomit.”

But they’re already backing away down the corridor. And a moment later, from my window, I see them cut across a field to the road, walking the way I went last night to the mountain. It’s become a lovely evening and watching them go is one of the loneliest things I can remember.

IGALIKU – GARÐAR

Long story short, I survive. Blinking in morning light, I evaluate. Still sick – shaky and fragile, but the worst of my fever’s broken. Gut-wrenching cramps double me over but it’s no longer constant. Maybe a virus, maybe something toxic inside. Gingerly I sit up and think through my options.

There’s a boat coming midday to haul me to Einar’s Fjord (cut to footage of Kirk Douglas, teeth clenched). I’m to be dropped at a place called Itilleq, which makes miniscule Brattahlid seem a metropolis. From there I need to hike roughly five kilometers over a ridge to the small settlement of Igaliku – the ancient site of Gardar (Garðar), Greenland’s Norse Bishopric, the result of Olaf Crowbone’s efforts and Leif Erikson taking after his mom.

With Jacky’s help I’ve arranged for a room and a meal at Igaliku’s lone lodge. Right now I can’t fathom leaving bed, dressing, packing for an overnight, taking a boat on open water, then climbing five kilometers to a place I don’t know, equipped with a shared bathroom, not to mention the type of food I may have to survive on. But as I did in the icy rain at Brattahlid, I decide this is why I came. I hum a few bars of my song *We Can Do Anything*, the chorus like anesthetic. And gritting my teeth like Kirk/Einar, I manage to dress and pack.

I shuffle upstairs to the buffet and pack some food for the day. I ask around for J-O and Gregers but learn they’ve set sail on their Viking longship. Once more I’m shuttled to the dock in the drafty red van, wondering how long the brake pedal duct-tape will hold as we roll onto the timber pier. A floating rope bisects the tiny harbour – an iceberg catch,

no different than a snake fence. Bergy bits and growlers rest against the rope, keeping company with a few moored boats. I descend the rattling gangway to another rugged Targa with another rugged skipper, and again we're off at full throttle.

It's a beautiful day, a painkiller as effective as the empowering lyrics looping in my head. Water's an alpine whitewash with icebergs in blue against a backdrop of green hills and basalt. Today it's just the skipper and me and I'm dropped once more on my own. I point inland, ground sloping up to rocky peaks. "That way to Igaliku?" I ask, and get a nod as he pulls away.

I left my big pack in Narsarsuaq and have a day pack with a small roll attached. I'm still extremely fragile but remember a quote from Anna Badkhen referencing the healing potential of a walk, or in this case, a hike – solvitur ambulando – sort it out by walking. "Long walks in open spaces," Badkhen writes, "are like ujjayi breath for the mind. The sheer volume of lucid air fills the mind, the distant skyline paces off a spirit level of peace. The expanse around unburdens the space within." And so I take a few deep breaths, nod once at nothing in particular, and very slowly trek up the hill.

There's a track to follow – a narrow strip of gravel called King's Road, reminding me of the King's Trail in Hawaii and making me wish I had that miserable nag Pili to haul me up this ridge. The path varies from loose rock to tamped earth. Alternating on and off the track I'm able to walk on gravel, dry dirt and grassy weeds, the changes pleasant underfoot. Rocks along the roadway are a rainbow of orange and pink, salmon and coral – bands of geology. Bedrock is blanketed in red and black moss – the look of rugs on concrete floor. A skull lays to one side, then I realize it's not a skull but a complete hipbone – leg sockets like eyes, the whole thing resembling a Venetian death mask, macabre in sun-bleached yellow. Sheep? Dog? Unknown. This could be a movie – lone traveller crossing dusty land, weathered bone exposed to the elements. Fine visuals but cliché, a rolling tumbleweed the only thing missing.

The piece of air-dried corpse at my feet takes me back to when I was six, the year I marauded Vernon's ice- and salt-covered streets as a Viking. Later that same year I encountered my first pagan burial. In the hills between Falkland and Westwold in British Columbia's southern interior

sits a small chain of lakes – deep green gems surrounded by lodge-pole pines. It's a place with eagles and ravens, falcons and osprey, black bear and cougar. The biggest lake is an angler's dream – long and deep with trout that grow until they're caught, which isn't often. The lake and its chain are called Pinaus, named for Chief Pinaus of the Interior Salish First Nations. His remains lay buried in soft earth – dark soil and clay that surround the water. Over time the terrain eroded, coming down in bad weather slips and seasonal thaws. Like all land it remained active, shifting with time.

We camped there as a family for years. Some summers the lake water warmed enough for a numbingly brief, hypothermic swim. I'd ride my bike in an undulating dirt oval around the campground, skirting one end of the lake. And where the bike trail split like a Scottish ditty – high and low – I'd coast down the rugged track to the lakeshore, where a sharply eroding bank fronted the water. From this spot you could see the Chief's bones halfway up the embankment. Each year his remains were further exposed, bones the colour of ivory protruding from the earth like breaks from a nasty injury – skeletal bits glaring from the dirt, threatening to animate and rise from the soil.

At some point a rough wooden frame was installed with a mesh screen of chicken wire, then a small piece of glass – a makeshift ossuary. It was exposure to death, an open book on mortality, the way a parent might leave a copy of *Where Babies Come From* lying somewhere it can't be missed. But unlike a book of answers, the Chief's bones only raised questions – complexity in the muddy ground. Different somehow than a familiar cemetery – that odd mix of nature and faith, blending grief with hope. This was more real, tangible as buried boats and grave mounds, a Völvic window between worlds.

I return to the present with a shake of my intact skull and leave the weathered bones behind. The road rises ahead of me with no end in sight. But despite my weakened state it's good to be moving, a distraction from traction, you might say. It feels like escape. The track winds its way around another inlet where hunks of ice bump shore. Peaks, water and ice under striated blue-sky are so stunning I'm tearful, as taken aback as when I read Armitage at the Turf Tavern. In *The Greenlanders* Jane Smiley hits

the mark, “If any place is the perfect picture of the world, it must be Greenland.”

If my sprint from the shitty terns set a personal best for six K, this hike of similar distance may take me longer than ever before. But despite my shuffling frailty, I’m happy, knowing I made the right choice, to endure whatever comes. The only sound around me now is moving air and the crunch of my boots on gravel. Maybe it’s the residual fever or a complete absence of mental chatter but I’m recalling landscape-fitting quotes with surprising clarity. “I lifted my eyes to the sky behind the peaks and felt the silence. This was what I had imagined a wilderness to be,” writes Rory Stewart in *The Places In Between*. Exactly what I’m experiencing. Wispy clouds change shape high overhead, taking on personalities and human traits. This place exudes spirit – pagan or otherwise. It’s no stretch to have faith here – worshipping what you feel but can’t quite define, connectivity in a colossal presence.

Eventually I crest the ridge, another wide valley and fjord opening below me. A three-masted schooner drifts far out in the bay with a solitary iceberg like a white mirage or a time-warp dream. Spilling from the base of the hill to the shore are the bright-painted buildings of Igaliku, one of the prettiest villages you could hope to encounter. Set away from the track is a bench, and I collapse onto the hard surface with my pack as a pillow, surprisingly awash with grief, missing my dad. And with a flood of tears I fall into the purest sleep I’ve had in days.

I wake to the sound of French – snippets of conversation – and struggle to remember where I am. There’s two men a short distance away and I realize they’re talking to me. I need to translate, and am forced to tap into my rudimentary French. I sit up and greet them, and it’s now obvious they’ve woken me. A wave of apologies, a c’est d’accord and pas de problème and then they engage me in conversation. After commenting on the glorious weather I let them know French is at best my third language, after English and Foul. We slow to a more manageable pace and I pick up the conversation like a French Cro-Magnon while they respond by speaking louder.

The two are Jean-Marie and Gerard, naturally. After a pleasant interaction they pretend to tip-toe away and in stage whispers say I can return to my slumber. I enjoy the view for a while, looking once more for

the schooner but it’s vanished. Just the iceberg remains and I wonder if it was in fact a dream. I get up and squint toward a point of land jutting into the fjord in time to see a stern disappear from view. It’s been at sail, moving with no visible wake – a ghost ship.

I descend into town, the track meandering in exaggerated, looping switchbacks. Sky’s pure blue and sun’s blissfully warm, glinting off the water. Every little building’s a similar size and shape but colours are vibrant and varied. The lodge is slightly larger, with a small sign out front. Jean-Marie and Gerard are seated at a small table with a bottle of red and a baguette, making it difficult to not see them as stereotypes.

“Ah, Guillaume! Ça va? Viens! Viens!”

I visit some more with my new friends, exhausting my French vocabulary before heading out to explore Igaliku and the abbey ruins of Gardar. The foundation is now a rectangular shape in the soil, hidden in parts by wild grass. Blocks of hewn stone the colour of red brick sit in angled rows, some stacked, some askew. There’s more here than at Brattahlid, but it’s only half the age – five hundred years old. Patches of grass have been cut by a weed-whacker and the site feels roughly maintained, less wild than the homestead of Erik and Leif.

Energy around the ruins is good but this touchstone pales in comparison to the natural beauty. I question my choice to leave here in a day but instead decide to make the most of it, and despite being weak and crampy, I head through the village to the fjord. The scene’s pastoral, bucolic. There’s a small bight of a harbour tucked in from the breadth of the bay with a slab of cracked concrete tilting into the water. Fingerlings swim languidly at the surface, reflecting sun in dazzling flashes of silver. I hunker down, reach out and stroke one as it passes. It seems surprised, not scared, and carries on without changing speed.

Lisa, a Dane who runs the lodge, gathers laundry from a line – mismatched towels and linen for the handful of rooms. We exchange waves. A couple pushes a stroller over rocky dirt path. Another exchange of waves and I like this place even more. At one of the twenty-odd buildings in town, I spot an old man on a porch. He waves. I wave back. He gestures me over.

The man is white-haired, a very old Native Greenlander, enjoying the sun on his porch. He slowly gets to his feet to greet me, using an arm-

brace cane and leaning onto the veranda railing. I smile and extend a greeting. His face grins but his smile comes from his eyes – dancing pools atop a stooped body. Some long white whiskers – no more than twelve – droop from his chin, the extent of his beard. With a nod it's clear he has no English, so instead we stand smiling and nodding, enjoying a silent interaction. Time here, like the land, is grand and sweeping and slow, only having context elsewhere – what I felt at Haida Gwaii. I stand with the man in remarkable comfort, an old married couple, companionship from proximity.

After a while his eyes light with a spark – something he recalls, something shareable. I watch him feel his way around foreign sounds in his mouth, like shuffling on ice, and patting his chest he says in slow, tentative English, "Christian."

This could be his faith or his Anglicized name. But I repeat his gesture, touching my chest and reply, "Bill."

He frowns and repeats my name, thoughtful, savouring the L-sound as though for the very first time, holding it there on his palate. Like the Brattahlid Jailor, everything's in his eyes – every feeling, silently shared.

He sweeps his hand – a gesture taking in land and water, then says, "Igaliku."

I smile and nod.

Then he draws my attention to a collection of driftwood and rocks on his porch, the vibrant colours I witnessed on the hike here. He indicates these came from around the fjord, showing me with another slow sweep of his finger. "Igaliku."

"Igaliku," I repeat, nodding.

Then I pull out my map of the area, unfold it and point to where we currently are, saying, "Christian. Bill." And I point like a dart finding bullseye.

He nods and smiles, looking at the map, then looking around the fjord.

We stay this way, silent, comfortable, for a long while. Then we make eye contact, holding it a good long time, smiling and nodding some more.

"Tak," he says. (Danish for "thank you.")

“Tak,” I reply, with another admiring look at his rainbow of rocks and driftwood. As his world shrinks with age he’s drawn the rest of it in, surrounding himself with a loose album of land and memories.

Back at the lodge we’re preparing for dinner. My new Dutch friends I met in Iceland – Petie and her husband Koos – have surfaced once more, winding up in Igaliku at the hostel. They’ve come to the lodge for Igaliku’s one cooked-food option.

Jean-Marie and Gerard are once more sharing a bottle of red wine and some bread. “Guillaume! Bien, bien! Viens ici!”

Lisa’s here, having finished the laundry, and I meet her co-worker Karen and the Greenlandic cook Pilu (“Bilu” – the P having a B sound). Pilu’s at the stove, stirring a cauldron of whale stew. And Arnos arrives, the handyman who seems to do everything outside the lodge while Lisa and Karen do everything inside. Arnos is another of the many middle-aged Danish men found around here, leftovers from when Denmark ruled the island and sent young men with trade skills to modernize infrastructure. See a gray-haired Caucasian male in Greenland who’s not a tourist and odds are they’re a Dane with a trade ticket, like Jacky the fixer who came temporarily and never left.

With nearly a dozen of us milling around the lodge lobby/dining room there’s a pleasant air of mealtime excitement. Karen gets an internet connection at the desktop and tries to identify the fish I was petting in the shallows.

“Probably baby salmon or char,” she says, turning her computer screen for us to see.

There’s a small blackboard on the wall with tonight’s menu written in chalk: a first course of mussel curry with rice and flutes with fin whale stew as our main, with a cartoon drawing of a spouting whale in case it’s not clear.

“What are flutes?” I ask Lisa, pointing at the menu.

“I thought that was the word in English!” she replies.

A series of shrugs and questioning looks around the room.

“This,” she says, pointing at a basket of bread, to which the rest of us make sounds of understanding.

I do my best to placate my gut with rice but still enjoy small portions of everything. My stomach’s new contents sit agreeably. After a tasty curry, Pilu brings out the whale, all of which is set on a communal table.

“I thought whale was forbidden,” Petie says.

“More controversial than forbidden,” I say, and relay my story of watching boats launch from Reykjavik Harbour – whale-watching to starboard, whaling to port.

Each of our group has a story of being in Iceland for the Euro football match against England. Every story’s unique – big crowds and small, city and country, all sharing the same intensity. Good conversation ensues at our family-style table in piecemeal pidgin: sixty percent French, twenty percent English, ten percent Dutch, and ten percent charades. Not creolized, but a linguistic mosaic, each of us finding intersection in our Venn diagram dialogue. The amount of humour we manage is exceptional. Laughter’s easy and frequent. Everyone has a good time, with virtually no booze involved. It feels like this is the way it’s supposed to be.

I have a day to explore before hiking back to Itilleq for a boat. I gaze around the settlement and surrounds and in my mind see my old friend Christian (or possibly my old Christian friend) sweep his hand over the area … Igaliku. Lisa’s on her way to work and we exchange waves. Organ music seeps from a structure that may be a school. Buildings are bright maritime reds, blues, yellows and colourful stone – chunks of granite scavenged from the bishop’s ruins, the abbey giving back to the community five hundred years on. In 1932 a preservation act stopped the practice of removing anything, leaving the remaining foundation I’ve come to see.

I hear the braying of sheep. So they *are* out there, somewhere, the sound sporadic and distorted as it echoes through rocky valleys. A rooster that crowed constantly yesterday afternoon is silent this morning. I suppose when sun’s up all season there’s no way to know *when* to crow. It’s now six AM and the sun’s already high in the sky. I slept well and feel

somewhat better – if I'm a six-cylinder I'm now firing on two or three. I mooch coffee from Arnos, who's been up for who knows how long, and munch a Snickers for first breakfast, squinting into sun dancing off the fjord. Seabirds cackle across the water and there's an occasional splash of jumping fish. Linen's drying on a line – stuff for the lodge – colours bright as buildings and homes, a comforting visual.

Making my way to the fjord I climb down steeply stepped boulders to the shore. Behind me rock's gouged in claw-like marks of glacial retreat. In *My Antonia*, Willa Cather describes just such a landscape. "There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made." Fingerlings glint in morning sun like silvery lures – willow leaves, changing from white-light to the same blue-green as the water. One little fish takes on an odd shape, curved like a crescent moon, and the gentle wash pushes it to shore. Its life's expiring. Maybe the water's just moving it in a lifelike way. It seems far away, down the rough embankment, too steep, but I scramble down regardless, reach out to the little fish and do my best to revive it. Futile. The curve in its body is rigor mortis setting in and I question the signs of life I thought I saw. I find it surprisingly sad but glad I tried. (And what difference would *that* have made? Well, all the difference to that one.)

Back at the lodge for breakfast I visit with Lisa. She's lived and worked abroad and now has a quilt-like accent, a regionalized patchwork of Aussie, British and American.

"I've been to Canada," she says, "Edmonton, Banth, Victoria Island. It's beautiful. Like here. Especially in the Rockies. But with trees!"

My breakfast is bread – fresh and delicious, smeared with fruit preserves.

"Did you try my Nutella?" Lisa asks. "It's homemade." And then tells me of her grandmother, whose recipe it is. "She's getting older, you know, how grandparents do. She doesn't have dementia but she's forgetful, so my cousins and I are putting together all her old recipes. But she just lists ingredients. No measurements. So we have to figure it out. 'Well I don't know how much flour!' she'll say."

So I have more sumptuous bread, and heap on Lisa's homemade Nutella. It's superb. Like the best birthday cake ever, and I tell her this.

“You know the secret to great Nutella?” she says. “No nuts! Just cocoa, margarine, sugar and eggs. Have some more.”

And I do.

We swap fishing stories, I let her know I’m keen to throw a line in the fjord, what with all those salmon and char thrashing about. And I share my story of catching three mackerel at once and the boy who taught me it doesn’t count if you’re an adult. Then Lisa describes fishing for cod.

“We just have a stick with lines and hooks, no bait. And the fish just bite. I pulled up a stick one time with six cod on it. Now *that’s* fishing!”

I wondered how old she was to decide if it counted. Then I ask her about running the lodge, and seasonality.

“Maybe we’ll go through September. But not October,” she says. “I’ll be out of a job, so …” as she pauses I’m expecting her to express anxiety but instead she adds with a grin, “So the world’s at my feet!” Which becomes my new favourite soundbite.

I think of the hike ahead, getting me back to the boat, and possible contingencies. “Is there a toilet anywhere between here and there?” I ask.

“A toilet?” Lisa says. “There’s no running water anywhere else! But there’s a house with a hole behind it. And this is Greenland. You need to go, you go.”

I borrow a rod and reel and go back to the water. I turn over rocks to find wriggling shrimp for bait. The little crustaceans are feisty and surprisingly strong. I could imagine one beating up an unsuspecting fish. There’s a gentle lap of water. Birds are calling good-naturedly, and sun’s doing a dance on the fjord. It’s a fine experience but one lacking in fish.

“Guillaume! Ah, Guillaume! Comment ça va?” Jean-Marie and Gerard have tracked me down. Remarkably they have no wine. Gerard’s brandishing a map. “We go now to walk in the mountain. Join us!”

I thank them but let them know I’m hiking the opposite direction, a leisurely loop to the boat at Itilleq.

“Ah, d’accord. Bien, bien. Bonne chance! Au revoir!” And the two march away along the fjord toward a peak resembling Mont Blanc.

There’s a small general store open a couple of hours each day, so I pop in for a look-see. In a freezer are black hunks of seal meat, along with

shrimp, scallops, prawns and lamb. On the shelves are a few tinned goods – meat pastes, fish and jam. I even find a fresh apple and pear, which I buy along with tinned herring to get me through the day.

Although it's beautiful and the people are wonderful, I'm okay to move on. A bit more to see and do but the truth is, I'm running on fumes. So with goodbyes and more waves, I sling my improvised kit on my back and head out. It's another steep climb on the winding dirt road to a fresh stretch of views. I've left myself lots of time and deviate from the road, marching overland, continuing to climb. From somewhere far away I hear a helicopter. The sound grows then fades and I never do see it.

It dawns on me I could keep climbing forever so I stop at a high outcrop, a rounded red slab of rock with black lichen, the look of a small Uluru. The lichen's brittle and dry and looks like old ash, crunching with a sound like crumbling wafers. I plunk down with a view of Einar's Fjord, white icebergs mirroring light cloud. Sky's more rippled than the water today. Our crossing should be easy.

Across the bay are rocky peaks and glacial curves, steppes and high plateaus with valleys of basalt and granite. Simple, vibrant colours take centre stage, blue and white and green. It feels as if I'm living another Stewart line from *The Places In Between*, "After a few minutes, it seemed I had never been so alone or anywhere so silent." But after a span I hear the faint sound of boots scrunching gravel. It slowly grows and I turn to see who it might be. It's an elderly man in a floppy hat with a pack and stout walking pole. As he goes past I hail him. He's startled to see another person, which is no surprise. We're a long way from anything. I learn that he's Swiss, travelling now after ten years of missionary work in the Namibian Serengeti.

"It was quiet there," he says. "But it's *very* quiet here."

His accent, like many here, is a worldly hybrid, English not being his mother tongue. He asks me my name and I tell him.

"Ben?" he says.

"No, Bill. Like William."

"Ah. William is easier for me. I am looking for the trail. It is marked on the map, but I don't think it exists."

He’s right. I’ve marched through a series of fields, across a slow creek, through a bog, and clambered over a barbed wire fence, methodically sweeping a swath of land in search of that trail. I’ve picked up faint sheep tracks, following them for a while before realizing they lead nowhere. Like him, I’m convinced whatever’s marked on the map no longer exists, if it ever did. I tell him as much, and he points ahead to a scoop-shaped valley that funnels toward the fjord.

“I wonder if it might be there.”

“Maybe,” I say, and wish him luck. He raises his walking stick in salute and carries on, the rocky sound of his steps fading away. With a view of the world I unpack lunch on my big sunny rock: tinned fish, apple and pear, the last of my jerky and a Snickers. No Wunderbar.

A solitary mushroom grows nearby, small, round and brown, stiff as rubber to the touch. Tiny red flowers grow from the rock I’m seated on, crimson on black, the opaque offspring of copper and ruby. There’s small golden blooms called sungorsiusaq and inneruulaaraq, white-blossomed aningaasat and blue tungujortunnguit. I could say wildflowers but where’s the fun in that? Beyond this are rocks the colour of bricks in water, similar to Christian’s veranda collection and the giant candy-corn on the King’s Road.

The intensity of the Arctic sun combined with my seat on a rock dusted in black moss has the effect of my lunching in a tanning bed. I realize I need to find shade, easier said than done in a treeless expanse of smooth stony hills. So I head toward Itilleq, in the direction of where the boat will land. There’s a steep rock face overlooking the water and by hunkering down I’m mostly out of the sun, at least for a while, feeling the first signs of heat stroke.

As sun comes around, my patch of shade vanishes and I head to the short pier to wait. Arnos is there and we sit together on the dock and visit, talking food, fish and whales, which here are much the same thing. A thunderous roar breaks our conversation, booming over the water – an unseen iceberg calving. There’s a period of silence and then we hear the boat, faint in the distance.

“See it?” he says.

I can just make it out, far away, motoring toward us.

“Now, watch. Understand it’s going twenty-five knots – fast – the skippers all go full-out.”

The boat barely grows in size as it approaches. Ever so slowly it begins to grow, getting marginally bigger. This continues for a discombobulating time.

“Do you see?” Arnos asks. “It’s a very long way away but we see it clearly. It seems to take forever to get here but it’s just that we see it longer, from a lot further away.”

“The clear air?” I ask.

“Yes.”

Which of course is our natural state. We’re *supposed* to see things many miles away, but no longer can through pollution. What passes as clean air elsewhere is anything but. And here I’d promised myself I wouldn’t write about the environment – shrinking glaciers and warming oceans – whatever people use to validate travel writing. But it’s hard not to, here where it’s all very much in your face.

Arnos and I go back to the topic of food, praising Pilu’s cooking and last night’s whale stew.

“It’s too bad you’re leaving,” he says. “Tonight Pilu’s making her meatballs. Lamb. Very good. And big!” He holds his hands like he’s describing breasts. “I eat four of them!” he says, laughing. “I meant to lose ten kilos working here. Instead I think I *gain* ten. The girls are always baking. It’s very good too.” And he laughs some more, a jiggle rippling through his chins.

QOOROQ ICE FJORD

I’m back at the red hotel at the base of the mountain, down the little road from Narsarsuaq airstrip. I have a different room – newer and fresher. Sun’s out, my body’s cooperating to the extent I can go a few hours without debilitating pain, so things seem quite good. I have dinner in the hotel dining room, the space where J-O, Gregers and I shared breakfast. The menu’s small: soup, fish and one meat dish – muskox, which I’m keen to try. I have the entire space to myself so settle in with a book and a view of Erik’s Fjord glittering in evening sun. A young, soft-spoken

Greenlandic woman sets a place for me, pours water and passes me a menu.

“We’re out of the muskox. We have reindeer,” she says. I order the reindeer. “Would you like that raw, medium or well done?” Her English is good. She hasn’t mispronounced rare. Raw is what she means, how some locals prefer it.

“I’ll have it medium, please,” I say with a smile. “And fish soup and a Qajaq (Kayak) beer.”

The meal comes with a salad of iceberg lettuce and bell peppers, the fresh veg a treat. The food’s very good, in outsized portions. I go to work on my platter of reindeer and the chef comes out from the kitchen – a thickset Dane – and stands, arms crossed, watching me eat. I smile and nod, indicating it’s all very good. He nods back stoically, remaining where he is. And I eat and nod some more, making suitable sounds of enjoyment. He nods back once more, then just stands, watching. I give up and simply eat under observation like some kind of controlled experiment. To my relief another table of diners enter and he goes back to the kitchen. I have another Qajaq for dessert, return to my room and sleep for twelve hours.

Next morning there’s life in the lobby. A flight will come and go today. This happens in the evening, so the handful of guests are checking out and stacking bags here and there, getting on with their day. I visit with Peter and Sue, a Kiwi couple. Having first heard them, I start the conversation with, “Where in New Zealand are you from?” the way the angler on the Hayle greeted me.

Peter and Sue are from Auckland, which they manage to say shamefully, like they’re telling me they have herpes. “Ah, lovely!” I say, meaning it. But in effusive-friendly-mode I’d likely say the same thing about herpes. They’re here for the combined baby-christening and wedding of a Greenlandic man who lived with them in Auckland on a student exchange fourteen years ago, a man they consider their godson.

Sue’s eyes moisten as she describes when she heard the news. “He called and said, ‘Mom, Dad, could you be at my wedding?’” To which Peter and I join Sue, each of us swiping at tears.

Then they show me photos of their trip so far. Their godson’s family lives on a tiny island up the coast, the direction of Thule. It’s reachable by

helicopter, which wasn't flying when Peter and Sue arrived. So instead they were picked up by a relative in a small boat and hauled six hours in open sea to their destination. They show me photos of the boat, maybe an eighteen-footer.

"This is where it was leaking," Sue says. "We had to bail the whole way."

"See this hole here?" Peter adds, pointing to a close-up photo. "That's the ocean you can see through the gap."

"We had to stop twice for fuel," Sue interjects. "Everyone smoking and sloshing petrol everywhere. We made sure we were on the helicopter back!"

A van arrives for them and we wish each other safe travels. I decide there may be time to climb another mountain so I see if I can find a map. The man at reception, a Native Greenlander, speaks little English. I tell him I'm looking for a map to hike nearby. He thinks about it, then walks me to the end of the corridor, where there's a grainy black and white aerial photograph of the area, likely taken when this was military space. He waves his hand over the photo the way Christian did in Igaliku, and I realize he's in fact showing me precisely what I need. (Sometimes the map *is* the territory.)

The lobby's emptied so the two of us visit a bit, as best we can. I comment on some sealskin covers stretched over hard chairs – lustrous fur in mottled gray with spots and natural stripes the colour of toffee.

His eyes light up. "I shot two seal yesterday," he says, clearly proud.

"Where was that?" I ask.

"Across the fjord, near Narsaq."

"Is that for food?"

"Meat for food, skin for selling," he replies.

"Is that a good day?"

He nods yes. "Lots of time, nothing."

"Do they float when you shoot them?"

"If they're fat enough."

"If not, they sink?"

Another nod.

“Then what?”

A shrug. “Only shoot when they’re fat enough,” he says, the same warm smile I’ve been encountering, entirely in his eyes.

I go back to the dock, another ride in the rickety van. The duct tape holds. Dominating the pier is the three-masted schooner from my dreamy view at Igaliku. She takes her name from Rembrandt – *Rembrandt van Rijn*. How appropriate, sailing this oil-on-canvas landscape. Today’s weather is stellar, matching the scenery. It’s as though we’ve bypassed Rembrandt’s predecessors, leap-frogging the Renaissance – two dimensions to four – Asian flat-art to this enveloping sensory experience. I clamber onto today’s boat – the *Puttut*, meaning Fog, piloted by a silent Greenlander. Huge caribou antlers adorn the front of the small enclosed bridge.

There’s a dozen of us on board with a young guide named Jakobine. “*Puttut*’s a good name for this boat,” she says. “It actually makes that sound.” Built in the 1950s, predominantly wood, the craft has a bulbous round prow like Amundsen’s *Gjøa*, designed to ride up and over floating ice, whatever it can’t push aside. We set sail, the first craft I’ve been on here not run at full throttle. Sure enough, we leave the pier with a sound like our name, put-tutting into the fjord.

Today’s my last in Greenland and I’ll spend most of it on water, trundling up a long inlet to the Qooroq ice fjord and glacier. Once more I think of Saint Brendan’s prayer, “Shall I take my tiny boat across the wide sparkling ocean? O King of the Glorious Heaven, shall I go of my own choice upon the sea?” Granted, the *Puttut* is probably sturdier than Brendan’s currach of wattle, bark and ox-hide, but still.

“The ice was here, the ice was there / The ice was all around / It cracked and growled, and roared and howled / Like noises in a swound!” said the mariner to the wedding guest in Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, describing ocean just like this. As we enter the ice fjord the skipper slows *Puttut* from three knots to two, then stops us in a wash of icy giants. But unlike the ancient mariner, we float in near silence. I’ve spent most of my time here with ice – bewildering hues of blue, white, gray and brown – but

nothing prepared me for this. The sea's a calcified tourmaline – one flat, non-reflective shade. I grab a cable attached to the mast and lean over the water, my shadow long on the surface. Now we're drifting with the bergs, to the softest sound of melting – soft drips and trickles. I feel airborne – icebergs as blue hued clouds with chiseled corners, alive with water-drops. We pass an iceberg that looks like a yacht, or maybe it's passing us. It's impossible to tell. There's another with a yawning cave, one like a towering column, and a cluster that could be Michelangelo's *Prisoners*, trapped in floating marble.

Our boat slides by a monstrous hunk of ice the size of a high-rise city block. If there was ever a time to use Brobdingnagian as a descriptor, this is it. And high atop the outer edge a line of seabirds stare, watching us pass. Elisha Kane called icebergs "God's own buildings, preaching [their] lessons of humility to the miniature structures of man." I think of this, beneath the oddly silent scrutiny of white birds on white ice, our boat dwarfed by the monolith. Despite bright sun, it's bitterly cold. I'm wearing everything from my pack – double pants, five layers up top and a toque over a second hat, still shivering. Salt and tide are the only things keeping this creamy blue-green sea liquid.

Suddenly an insect-like hum whizzes by and we realize we're being circled by a drone. Then we hear the whine of an outboard motor and a Zodiac emerges, weaving toward us between icebergs. It's Jacky, and he's having us filmed for a promotional video. He's piloting from the stern while at the front of the rhib stands a Hollywood-handsome guy, grinning, long blond hair flying, held loosely in place with stylish sunglasses tipped back on his head.

"Hej! Hej!" Hollywood shouts, all cheekbone and Chiclet teeth. "Hello! Hello!"

Jacky pulls the inflatable alongside *Puttut* and the two jump aboard in a single motion. Jacky makes introductions all around. The guy with him is a Scandinavian filmmaker and with big smiles he moves amongst us, snapping photos while the drone buzzes by in looping orbits. As this carries on, *Puttut* is lifted by a slab of ice – a grinding heave, rising our boat at a tilting angle, followed by a prolonged scraping shimmy, and we settle back into water. We do this a few more times, up and over ice until we come to a standstill, stopped solid. Pack ice extends from our boat in a

continuous sheet to the glacier, a massive vee framed in peaked mountains, where a wall of blue ice rises seventy meters from the water, fifteen hundred meters wide. It appears very close.

“How far away would you say that is?” Jacky asks our little group.

Everyone aboard is now familiar with the clean air effect – seeing things far away with sharp clarity.

“Five kilometers,” someone says. “Maybe eight.”

Jacky smiles. “It’s seventeen kilometers away,” he says. “Now. Martini time.”

It’s eleven AM.

The skipper emerges from his tiny bridge and tosses a bucket on a rope into the sea. With a few tries he manages to scoop a chunk of calved berg into the bucket, which he hauls over the gunwale. Jacky unsheathes an icepick, hacks violently at the lump and fills plastic cups with ice shards while Jakobine fills each with green-tinged liquor.

“Now,” Jacky says. “Look at your drinks. And listen.”

We do as instructed and the glacial ice begins to bubble, creating an effervescence and carbonating our drinks. It increases, our martinis now sparkling.

“Glacial ice, you see, is full of air,” Jacky explains. “That’s what gives the icebergs their colour. As it melts, it releases oxygen.” We all marvel, holding our cups to the light, now full of dancing bubbles and the sound of fountain soda-pop.

I relax into my own dreamy space, propped in a rounded corner of the boat, enjoying my morning martini with closed eyes, sun shining on my face. I crunch some ice in my teeth, then I hear, “Yes! Yes!”

It’s the filmmaker, radiant smile behind a big lens. Unbeknownst to me I’ve been captured on film. “Your light’s perfect!” he says. “Do that again, with your eyes closed, chew the ice!” I find this hilarious but do as I’m told, considering myself nothing if not professional.

He clicks some more stills then films live video. “Yes! Yes! Now smile. Smile!” he says, working his way around me, playing with light.

“How about a few with my shirt off?” I say.

Hollywood’s face goes still for a moment as he mentally translates, then bursts into laughter, “Ha-ha! No, no. Shirt on is fine. Okay! Again, exactly the same!”

Once more I’m ready for my close-up.

“Hey! You’re a very good actor!” Hollywood says, clapping me on the shoulder.

Maybe this is mallemaroking, a Greenlandic term for the carousing that inevitably occurs amongst sailors on icebound ships. Never having spent time mallemaroking, I can’t be certain. If so, it seems we’re done. With an armload of leftover booze, Jacky jumps back in the zodiac, followed by the filmmaker. A reefing pull on the outboard and the two motor away, snaking through icebergs, followed by the drone – Hollywood a retreating gleam of hair and teeth.

Meanwhile, our skipper fires up *Puttut*’s diesel engine and, with a few shudders, rocks us out of the pack ice, shoveling aside bergy bits in the turn. Gradually we wriggle free of the floe and head back to Narsarsuaq. Along the way I spot a sea eagle in flight, massive and dark – the first since Scotland. Jakobine tells me they’re rare and we’re lucky to see it. Another eagle, another special place. Maybe the World Tree – the mother ash – is here. Then again it may be all around, like Christian collecting nature – the world where we are, a gathering of memories.

Back on land, mosquitoes are out in thick, pestilent clouds. Strong repellent keeps them from biting but not from flying into eyes, ears and nose. It’s a test in finding one’s inner calm, a test I tend to fail. I’ve read they can actually drive caribou mad. There’s a handful of travellers around, killing time until the plane arrives – people in mosquito-net hats, smoking to thin the bugs. I exhale from my nose in aggressive short bursts and walk briskly from Jacky’s coffee shack to the museum.

A stooped curmudgeon guards the museum entrance ensuring people leave funds in the honour jar, which strikes me as not much of an honour system. I drop some kroner in the box and the gray-haired piece of gristle grudgingly lets me pass. The museum’s excellent. Displays cover an exhaustive breadth of Greenlandic history – Native, Norse and U.S.

military – a cross section of perspectives. There's a collection of black and white photos of American families stationed here in the 1940s and '50s – a picnic, a dance, births and deaths – a tiny society making a life in extreme conditions. There's taxidermied birds, species names written in Danish, Greenlandic and English: curlew, plover, bunting and one listed as Gråsisken/Orpingmiutaq/?Sisken? In other words, not quite sure what you people call it. Perched motionless, the birds remind me of York's unflappable pigeons.

Whatever I tapped to complete this leg of my trail, it's now drained. I'm running on E, and in the words of John Mann, "I need home for a rest!" I say goodbye to Jacky and a few new friends. Jean-Marie and Gerard are here, also waiting for the plane, this time sharing a bottle of white.

"Guillaume! Bonne chance!"

I hardly have strength to translate and simply wish them both well. Gerard gives me his address, insisting I come to visit. I'm tempted to give him Norman and Huw's address in New Zealand.

There's a Swiss woman from the ice fjord excursion, and we enjoy a quiet conversation. When she explains she wants to start reading more English books I give her my Robert Macfarlane, well-suited to hiking-oriented travels. Now, with no book or snacks and most of my anti- this-and-that pills consumed, my pack feels like a helium balloon. I take it to the airstrip, check in, and watch afternoon light creep down mountains.

One destination lies ahead, a finale to this North Atlantic excursion and in fact to my viking trail. From Leif Erikson's Greenland home I'm going to Newfoundland's northern tip, to his settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows. One more stop to complete my saga, but one I need to travel sixteen-and-a-half thousand kilometers to reach – half the Earth's circumference. I see Lewis Chessmen sliding into place on a checkerboard map, one move to finish the match. I wonder how conclusion will feel.

New World

While the Vikings were the first Europeans to land in America, they were the only ones smart enough to leave.

—Oscar Wilde

NEWFOUNDLAND – VINLAND

I recall visiting with a flight attendant on my journey to York. While the rest of the passengers slept, I stretched my legs in the small galley and we spoke for some time. He told me of growing up where the tip of Labrador sits between Quebec and the Atlantic, what Vikings called Markland – place of forests. It was a mining town when he was there, mostly French, expressly built for the solitary industry – extracting iron, no different than Vikings searching for bog ore. This was where he was born, grew up, went to school and made friends.

“But you won’t find it on a map,” he said.

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“They closed the mine, years ago, and the town with it. Everything gone. There’s nothing left of it,” he paused, and I watched him relive it, remembering. “It’s a strange feeling, having your home town disappear.”

“I can’t imagine,” I said, with a slow shake of my head.

Thinking some more he added, “You feel hollow. Like when your father passes away.” He met my gaze and said, “You have all the memories … but he’s just not there anymore.”

Unlike that northern Labrador community, the thousand-year-old settlement we’re going toward did not disappear. It simply hid, reducing itself to a series of windswept bumps resembling grassy burial mounds. It’s the final pin in our globe-spanning map, a long-awaited finish to my saga. Deb and I are travelling to Canada’s newest province, officially renamed Newfoundland and Labrador, in search of Leif Erikson’s fabled

Vinland. Even reaching the start of this excursion covers the same distance as going to Scandinavia.

At the little museum in Narsarsuaq I'd read the following: "Today most researchers agree that Leif Eriksson's Helluland is Baffin Island and Markland is Labrador. In the case of Vinland, however, no such unanimity is to be found. Many are of the opinion that the information given in the Sagas is so imprecise that no conclusion can be reached regarding the exact position of the place. Others are convinced that Vinland never existed, but is a mythical land far to the West, like blissful Avalon of Celtic mythology, a place only reached after an interminable voyage over a boundless sea, but which in return offered eternal happiness to those who reached it."

But in their research, Anne and Helge Ingstad used sailing distances given in the Sagas to place Vinland at fifty-two degrees north – roughly that of Newfoundland's L'Anse aux Meadows. The fact they found Leif's wintering settlement – a place for ship repair, iron-smelting smithy and kiln – makes it seem conclusive. Then again, maybe Vinland's still out there, "over a boundless sea," a tantalizing ellipsis to our trail's curving road.

While mosquitoes hovered in thickening clouds in Narsarsuaq, I stayed in the museum and read on: "In about the year 1000, according to the *Greenland Saga*, Erik the Red's son, Leif, felt the urge to find the land Bjarni Herjolfsson had seen. He bought Bjarni's old ship and set out with 35 men – heading first for the country of great icy glaciers, the last place Bjarni had seen. They went ashore, and called the place Helluland (Land of Stone, or Cliffs). Later they came to a flat wooded coast with an enormously long white sandy beach. This place was given the name Markland (Land of Trees). Two days later they were again sailing the open sea with the wind in the Northeast. They reached an island, covered with tall grass heavy with dew. Never, they said, had they tasted anything as sweet as that dew. On the mainland close by, in the lee of the island, they built huts to serve as winter quarters, as the place offered a wealth of salmon of a size they had never seen before, and rich fodder for the animals."

Despite being the world's driest author, incomparable researcher Kirsten Seaver offers supporting facts in *The Frozen Echo*, where she outlines the

crux of what brings us here: “Archaeological investigations begun by the Ingstads proved beyond any doubt that the site they found at L’Anse aux Meadows on northern Newfoundland Island was Norse and C-14 datable to around A.D. 1000, and that it therefore may well have comprised the wintering houses built by Leif and used by his immediate successors in those waters. The site’s location is strategically perfect, but not by any stretch of the imagination is it a lush, grape-growing region, even allowing for the warmer climate a thousand years ago. As late as in the 1530s, the explorer Jacques Cartier claimed to have found grapes on both sides of the St. Lawrence; today it is considered necessary to look south of the 45th parallel to find wild grapes. As for the self-sown wheat that Leif Eiriksson found in Vinland according to *Eiriks Saga* some scholars think the grain was lyme grass seeds, while others refer to the wild corn or rice that Cartier found on various islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and that grows as far north as Newfoundland.”

Seaver continues, “… the Norse also kept looking when they found themselves in North America. Most likely, they explored for quite a distance down the mainland coast and some way up the St. Lawrence, just as Eirik the Red had explored considerable stretches of Greenland before deciding to settle there.”

In short, plenty of research, a handful of facts, and endless speculation. Will we be in Vinland? Maybe. The dreamer in me rather likes the uncertainty, consistent with the mythic nature of every good saga. But what’s certain is that we’re going to the only known Viking site in North America – Leif Erikson’s home away from home, where Europeans and Paleo-Eskimos first met. The significance is irrefutable.

Touching down in chill midnight drizzle we stroll directly from the terminal on damp sidewalk to St. John’s’ lone airport hotel. We have a short but restorative sleep, a few coffees, and pick up a rental vehicle that still smells new-car fresh. (Twenty-nine kilometers on the odometer.)

“Watch out for moose,” the rental agent warns.

“Mostly morning and evening?” Deb asks.

“Dawn and dusk, yes,” is the reply. “But they were running around the parking lot at two in the afternoon,” she adds.

Before hitting the road I settle in with another coffee and a stack of maps and tourist brochures. A piece of art adorns the wall, a schematic of a Grand Banks dory – a museum-quality engineer’s draft as though sketched by Leonardo. Newfoundland lays unfolded on the bed, a glossy paper comforter of gnarly inlets, peninsulas and maritime history. I trace a finger across the map, folds rippling into origami topography. Today, an undulating line will take us northwest from St. John’s through Terra Nova National Park to Twillingate, a peninsular island. A travellers’ guide rests on my lap with Newfoundland’s delicious tagline, “Lost and Found. Lost: agenda. Found: freedom.”

We leisurely buy rations and head out on winding highway – windswept expanses of stunted tuckamore forest and marshy lakes. Every so often a blistering vista opens up – hills of solid stone, tree-lined fjords and water dotted with icebergs, bergy bits and bobbing growlers in ivory and dusky blue. Eventually we stop to feast at a small restaurant on a dock – lobster rolls, thick chowder and Iceberg beer, ending the day with a stroll around Twillingate, its harbour jammed with ice – floes and pans buckling into shore. It feels like the inside of a freezer long overdue for defrosting. The air’s watery and frigid. There simply isn’t enough clothing to get warm – as Theroux described Scotland, beauty and harshness in equal extremes.

Morning brings more fog and ice, the island packed like fresh fish. With bellies full of eggs, toast and partridgeberry jam, we layer on clothing and hike a staggered series of frigid headlands. A fog horn howls, lonely and haunting, the sound of desolation, wool and oilskin. We hike to view natural stone arches far out in a bay and circumnavigate Twillingate island in the vehicle – scalloped bays, brightly painted clapboard buildings, beached boats and docks with hanging buoys that from a distance resemble bobbly red earrings.

Like proper tourists we attend a dinner theatre – skits and music – fiddle, accordion, bodhrán, banjo, mandolin, guitar and Newfoundland’s ubiquitous ugly stick. It’s a motley team of talented musicians who feed and entertain us, making something special seemingly from nothing.

From Twillingate we cross The Rock east to west, a long and uneventful drive (aside from moose watching us pass), to Gros Morne National

Park – high stone tablelands and deep steely fjords. Lunch at an Irving Oil diner fuels us, a walk through birch and moose droppings on the Mattie Mitchell Mi'kmaq Trail invigorates us, and late in the day we arrive at Norris Point, a quaint village tucked in a rugged bay. For dinner it's moose burgers and Quidi Vidi beer in Rocky Harbour. Total moose encounters: two.

Next day we drive up the west coast for a boat tour of Western Brook Pond – a landlocked fjord, the result of changing sea levels and shifting glaciers. Cold, icy, even frigid can't accurately describe the experience. It's *beyond* freezing – bone-numbing cold. Paired with scenery. Waterfalls plummet from cliffs of billion-year-old stone, the same stuff we gawked at in West Scotland – original earth from the very first continent, the stuff you can only carbon-date and leave to Stephen Hawking to comprehend.

In the evening we warm up with thick cut cod the texture of halibut in crisp beer batter with onion rings and pints of ale at the Anchor Pub, visiting with a friendly couple from Saskatoon. A band takes the stage and after what feels a polite amount of time we leave as discreetly as possible. Awful can't do justice to Anchors Aweigh – talented musicians who long ago stopped caring about playing what people want to hear. I suppose it's better than EI. Part of me admires their arrogance and oddly inverted perseverance. But our evening concludes superbly with liquor and fudge from the store next door – the sign out front reading, "Liquor and Fudge."

"Liquor and fudge!" I exclaim redundantly, "Together at last!"

Suitably high on sugar and booze we watch a magnificent sunset – orange and purple over dark slate and sea. The world seems very, very good. Back in our unit, anaesthetized with screech, I pass out.

A rejuvenating period of unconsciousness is followed by a day of sightseeing and hiking around Bonne Bay and the Tablelands. We crunch our way up a hill in June snow, and skid back to our vehicle in mud. I visit Norris Point's aquarium – more research facility than anything, part of Memorial University, with friendly staff and a welcoming energy. Back at our accommodation a bag of lobster meat becomes sandwiches on soft white bread – a picnic in our room. A good day, despite an absence of fudge. Total moose encounters: three.

Another day of driving ensues, north to Port au Choix, where we explore an interpretive centre of archaeological digs revealing fifty centuries of

Indigenous history – Maritime Archaic to Paleo-Eskimo, Dorset and Beothuk. We admire primitive tools, weapons and water views until once more hard wind and plummeting temperatures have us scrambling back to the vehicle.

Continuing our drive up the Great Northern Peninsula we stop at Flowers Cove, a place of thrombolites – living, breathing, prehistoric rock. It's the very start of life on Earth. The only other oxygen emitting stones are the stromatolites in remote Shark Bay, Western Australia – a place we visited on another long drive north on another enormous coastline, but there the temperature was over 50 degrees Celsius. I think of that blistering day as I shiver by these mushroom-shaped stones. Tupperware ads come to mind – going from oven to freezer, as we've now done chasing these burping rocks around the globe.

Carrying on north, the sky clears over the Gulf of St. Lawrence, mirroring sea and offshore icebergs in every shade of ivory and blue. The temperature begins to rise and it becomes a lovely bright day. Across the water through low wispy cloud we glimpse Labrador – Markland, a snowy bruised band on the horizon. As the Viking Trail highway curls east we veer sharply north, to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of L'Anse aux Meadows – my adventure's tantalizing endpoint.

A longship prow in iron greets us, barely discernible through heavy haar. Atop a low hill sits more ironwork – Norse travellers in relief, surveying the land. Fog shifts, distorting landscape into dreamy mist. At the Visitor Centre we're greeted by a hiker in Parks Canada green and a bearded guy in period garb, both smiling, happy where they are. We're directed outside to explore the ruins – building foundations – lumpy lines of boggy grass between a coppery serpentine creek and icy inlet. Beyond this are reconstructed buildings of turf and wood, replicating the originals.

This is where I was in miniature at Viking World in Reykjanesbær – the model accurate to the finest detail. There I hunkered down to peer through display glass while here I simply kneel and place a hand on a raised foundation – one of three halls and five huts, open to whatever energy remains. I'm patient, but feel only sod. Sod all, you could say. But it feels good – a living touchstone, the satisfaction of completion.

The Labrador Current cools this spot of land. The result, biodiversity similar to Greenland, perhaps giving the Norsemen a sense of familiarity,

reminiscent of home. We follow a trail that wraps around the bay, tramping over patchy moss and rock, wind-crusted snow and boardwalk on bog. Soon this subarctic tundra will enjoy its short season of Alpine ragwort, Norwegian cudweed and silver willow. But now all we have are an icy bay, ethereal mist and timelessness.

I read the official park brochure: “A real-life saga. Cast your gaze over the water and imagine a summer day, around a thousand years ago, when a Norse expedition from Greenland landed on Newfoundland’s Great Northern Peninsula. Following the coast around the North Atlantic, they had arrived at a strategic location, within sight of Labrador, near the entrance to the Strait of Belle Isle. Under Leif Eiriksson’s leadership, the group of 60-90 people set up a sturdy encampment of turf-walled buildings that served as an over-wintering base for exploring to the south via the Gulf of St. Lawrence. For the next decade or two, successive expeditions travelled to this region they called Vinland, mainly in search of hardwood lumber. They reached at least as far south as the east coast of New Brunswick – a land where wild grapes grow.” I breathe a contented sigh, finally rounding bases to touch home.

Back in the car we bounce along to the end of the road, with nothing beyond but Greenland – chunks of which still crowd the beach and bay. There’s a huge bronze statue of Leif, a twin to the one at Brattahlid on Eiriksfjord, where some of these bergs began. Across the potholed road from the statue is the Norseman Restaurant. We head in from the weather and relax to meals of lamb, scallops, duck and partridgeberry pie.

Visiting with our server, we learn she’s the great granddaughter of local fisherman George Decker. It was George who in 1960 led Anne and Helge Ingstad to the lumps in the grass here at L’Anse aux Meadows, believing them to be remains of Indigenous dwellings. But with the discovery of an iron-smelting forge – technology unknown in the New World – along with a Norse spindle whorl and cloak pin, it was obvious that George had in fact brought them to Leif Erikson’s settlement.

As great-grandpa George was showing the Ingstads the grassy bumps that would prove the Vikings’ presence in North America, something remarkably comparable yet unrelated was all the buzz. The Vinland Map. An authentic, fabricated Viking map. Real in that it’s very old, startlingly accurate, and crafted with genuine cartographic precision. And yet it’s a

hoax. Made by a talented mapmaker with an artisan's flair, it was hotly debated in academic circles for years. Three highly respected experts staked their professional reputations on the Vinland Map's authenticity. Tiny wormholes in the ancient paper matched perfectly with those of a centuries-old companion volume. There was no doubt about the Vinland Map. Its authenticity was announced the day before Columbus Day celebrations, quashing Italian American pride with verification that other Europeans came here first. Until another expert noticed the slightest tint to a bit of the map's ink, a blueness in the black that could only have been etched years after its seeming creation. The Vinland Map was proven to be a fraud. Leading up to this, the only thing that didn't add up was the fact that Vikings weren't mapmakers. It would be like discovering a Pope (let's say Callistus III because the dates work) kept a secret stash of horoscope clippings and then discovering them just before the release of the latest Dan Brown thriller revealing *just* such a conspiracy. Extraordinary, but suspect.

But the cartographically talented prankster had done his research (assuming it was a he). Enough material can be found in the Sagas to come up with the following, which was meticulously engraved in gothic script on the map: "By God's will, after a long voyage from the island of Greenland to the south toward the most distant remaining parts of the western ocean sea, sailing southward amidst the ice, the companions Bjarni and Leif Eiriksson discovered a new land, extremely fertile and even having vines, which island they named Vinland."

Fabulous fake map aside, meeting the offspring of the guy that found Leif's digs (pun intended) and the most significant piece of European archeology in North America is beyond satisfying. Almost as satisfying as the partridgeberry pie she brings us (à la mode). Now, having eaten most of what the Norseman has on offer, we drive on to St. Anthony – the harbour town named by Jacques Cartier in 1534. At the headland we watch sea ice heave while sun sets and a full moon takes its place. The vast undulating quilt's as remarkable as seeing the Grand Canyon – that first emotional glimpse of staggering magnitude. And an otter, tiny in the white vista, slithers from ice to water to ice again, worming through the maze.

In the morning I find a Washburn guitar in the hotel lobby. Slinging on a sealskin strap I play *A Boat Like Gideon Brown* while gazing at the sea. Next door we go through the Wilfred Grenfell museum – commemorating the first doctor to establish a medical practice in the area, caring for natives and local fishermen by way of ship, foot and dogsled. His life is a story of adventure – at one point stranded on an ice floe with his huskies – superhuman feats of endurance and ceaseless compassion.

Once more in the vehicle we head down the Great Northern Peninsula, stopping at the White Rocks – former seabed sprouting wildflowers – the look of a salt pan splashed in purple. We visit The Arches Provincial Park and carry on to Cow Head, where we hike a grassy forest trail, shoreline dunes and golden beach reminiscent of Markland sand referenced in the Sagas.

At Deer Lake we stop at Irving Oil for a meal. Overcome with nostalgia I foolishly order liver and onions. After an extended period sawing at the leather on my plate I give up, and instead fill up on fried onions and milkshake. In the time it takes us to eat, the season changes to summer, the thermometer leaping to 28 degrees Celsius. We check into a hotel and call it a day. Total moose encounters: seven.

From Deer Lake we head east but veer from the TCH (Trans-Canada Highway) to the sleepy hamlet of King's Point, where we peer into a locked-up Whale Centre at a massive reconstructed skeleton – likely humpback. Down the road I stop for a birch beer soda at a mom-and-pop convenience store, conveniently greeted by an *actual* mom and pop.

"Do you have a washroom?" I ask mom.

"Ya, but you can't use it. It won't flush. Unless you just gotta pee, den dat's fine. Do you just gotta pee?"

In fact I do, and tell her so.

"Oh, if you just gotta pee den dat's fine. Go on ahead."

So I do.

Meanwhile pop's gone out to the vehicle and aptly enough popped his pop head in the open passenger window where Deb's sitting.

“Hey BC girl!” he says with a grin.

To which Deb and pop proceed to visit. I’d already answered a, “Where you from?” prior to peeing, as most conversations here start with, “So, where you from?” followed by, “And how d’ya like it here?” Of course the answer’s always, “Lovely,” because it is. Which is invariably followed by a satisfied nod from the local – understanding, acknowledgment, approval.

We drive some more and lunch in Gander – turkey-cranberry-dressing sandwiches on fresh baked bread – then continue on to Trinity. After a stroll around town on a seaside path at the base of Gun Hill we enjoy drinks, dinner and conversation at a refurbished waterside shed – The Twine Loft – with couples from Orillia and Calgary. Dinner is Atlantic salmon, dessert a local version of sticky toffee pudding with cream.

Back in our lodging, a heritage house B&B, we go to bed in a small upstairs room with antique furnishings and frilly drapes. I fall asleep to the sound of hard wind – outside, that is – along with a moaning fog horn and muttering creaks in the walls. I try to convince myself it’s not ghosts.

Next day we explore the snaking Bonavista Peninsula, our objective the Skerwink Trail – five-and-a-half kilometers of rugged coast with clifftop views of curved horizon, icebergs and granite sea stacks, everything enormous. We park the car and make our way to the trailhead. There’s a lone house on the path, where a man leans on a railing, enjoying a sunny morning.

“Careful of the moose,” he warns. “There’s a couple just up ahead.”

“Thanks!” I call back, clueless as to what one does around a moose. Is it the same as a bear? Make noise? Look big? Outrun your companion? Unless the animal’s citified, in which case you’re probably fucked without a big head-start. I suppose we’ll find out. I’ve only had two aggressive bear encounters, both of which I survived unscathed, one atop Cypress Mountain on the Baden Powell Trail, the other at a lounge in Palm Springs.

The Skerwink Trail starts out as narrow gravel road, then plunges into fir, birch and spruce. Almost immediately we spot the moose. They’re enormous, even from two hundred meters. The two beasts stop grazing, meet our gaze and watch us pass, taking the occasional nibble while

keeping a wary eye on us. I take a couple of blurry pictures and we move on. Exciting and highly uneventful. I later learn from a friend who grew up in northern B.C. it's when cows are with calves that they're dangerous, or bulls in rutting season – in other words, most of the year. He backed it up with a story of his father being treed by an angry cow moose, where he was forced to spend the better part of a day.

We carry on and the trail climbs, following the shore, offering glimpses of dusky ocean through thickets before opening onto exposed headland. Seabirds cling to sheer cliffs just beyond crashing waves – angry whitewash hammering stone monoliths. We descend and climb some more, the demands of the trail greater than its modest distance. It becomes a good workout, coaxed on by scenery, with intermittent views across the bay to Trinity, its squat lighthouse proud and prominent.

Following our hike we drive toward Bonaventure, passing more historical sites with windy vistas. The day clears and we have a sunny lunch at Bonavista Social Club – handmade pasta with lobster chunks and a view. Back in Trinity we stroll around town and join a busy dinner crowd at Dock Restaurant for cod, chips and local beer, content as our journey winds down.

Sunday brings another long drive, though less than previous days. Only four hundred kilometers of serpentining. No otters or elderly on the road. Here it's pothole dodging and being moose aware. Road signs warn us along the way, *Watch for potholes. Watch for moose*. Meanwhile, CBC morning's Jigs and Reels keeps us company – stories, songs and static as the radio comes and goes.

A detour takes us to Petty Harbour, Alan Doyle's home town, where we lunch on lobster rolls at Chafe's Landing while PWG (Pink White and Green) flags flutter outside – staunch nods to the Republic of Newfoundland. Arthur O'Brien of the Navigators plays an acoustic lunchtime set – his gravelly baritone like Tom Waits – a superb experience with good food and music. The day feels serendipitous, cherry highlights topping our excursion. "And maybe that is the real point of pilgrimages," writes Marta Maretich in *The Incompetent Pilgrim*. "You find what you are not looking for."

Following lunch we hike the film set of *Random Passage* – a recreated village from the turn of the nineteenth century – then make our way to St.

John’s to explore George Street, Signal Hill and Cape Spear – North America’s most easterly point. A long, white picket fence and sentinel lighthouse crown the headland with nothing beyond, just navy blue sea and a whiff of Ireland. We buy food, drop the car and check into the airport hotel once more, where we began this leg of our journey – eleven days and thirty-two hundred driving kilometers ago. Total moose encounters: ten.

End of a Saga

And the end of all our exploring / will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

—T. S. Eliot

Back home: a Vancouver view – water, mountains, gulls and crows – the bustle of tugs and tankers, seaplanes and heli-jets, all plying the blue of sea and sky. Sun strikes windows on hillside homes – bursts of fiery gold. Beyond the bay, where inlet sprawls to ocean, bulkers glow in morning light. Moored sailboats ping nautical tintinnabulation. A ship slips westward under the big green bridge, bound for who knows where. Maybe Avalon. While over the pole, Icelandic horses are changing with the leaves. “Do not look back,” reads the sign on Haida Gwaii. “There is much more to see, feel and love.” While a bench I like to rest on is engraved, “If you’re going to look back, laugh.”

Epilogue

There’s a story Phil Cousineau recounts in *The Art of Pilgrimage*. Knut Rasmussen, the Danish Arctic explorer, first heard it from a native Greenlander – the legend of a Nordic hunter who lived beyond every settlement, hunting from his dogsled.

One time the hunter came upon sledge tracks leading north. He followed the trail, travelling further than he ever had, to find seasonal dwellings unlike anything he’d seen. Fresh tracks indicated whoever built them had continued north. The hunter couldn’t imagine venturing onward. He was already further than ever before. And he wondered who would travel to the edge of the world and choose to continue on.

Next season he returned with a gift of firewood and placed it inside one of the dwellings. Again there were recent tracks, but no one was there. The following season the hunter came back, once more seeing fresh tracks leading into the distance. Still there was no one in sight, but his gift of firewood had been used. And in its place was a litter of fine husky sled dogs, invaluable to the hunter, and he knew this gift was left for him in gratitude.

Which is how the story concludes, with the hunter never knowing the source of the gifts from his journey, but treasuring what he received, content in accepting that “beyond all that is mystery.”

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