

Ghost Tree

A conversation with the Icelandic Downy Birch tree (*Betula pubescens*) in 3 parts; Past, Present and Future

The River Pvertá in Drumbabót, Southern Iceland (Past)

We found only the living
On our first encounter with your kind.
We had journeyed far to find you,
From Reykjavik by car,
To the south, just passed a town called Hella,
Where we imagined the kids crossed out the “a”
And added “welcome to” at the beginning.
We were promised an ancient graveyard
And instead found life.
Our feet had touched the very nature of your destruction,
Wading through the cold and turbid waters
Of the river Pvertá,
Balancing on pebbles
Worn down by a journey from the mountains.
But what we found was
A lush forest carpeted with lupines
Where we expected a desert.
Were we already in the future?
Was not this supposed to be the past?
Only days before
I had trod the mole hills
Of a Norfolk graveyard,
We had buried a British force of nature,
Bronze paddle for the eskimos,
This may be Iceland
But the River Waveney has run
Just as cold and punishing as the Pvertá.
But was this young copse just a distraction?
It did not take us long to find you,
Scattered amongst the gravel,
Dead and unburied,
All leaning towards the south-west,
Crushed by boulders and ice
Released by a volcano called Katla 1100 years ago.
We walked among your remains,
Liberated from the earth only fourteen years earlier,
Imagine, another flood and you appeared above ground.
Cleansed from the volcanic sediment that
Had smothered you to death all those years ago.
The day was appropriately dull and overcast,
We filmed and sketched your decay while marveling at your resistance,
Were your seeds close by, or washed away to Selfoss in the east?
We prayed for rebirth
While horses escorted us from your resting ground.

The Kjarnaskógur Woods, Akureyri, northern Iceland (Present)

In the present you were easier to find,
There were no perilous journeys across rivers and fields,
Just a circular bus route on the outskirts of Akureyri,
Past houses fashioned by Cubism
Amidst a treeless landscape,
Somewhere between a runway and a golf course
We found you just past the caravan site,
Growing tall amongst neighbors of larch,
Your roots covered by horsetail and globeflowers,
The cascading stream brought water for life on this occasion,
Not death and destruction.
I lay down on the green flora beneath you
And studied the scars on your bark,
You might yet outlive your Drumbabót relatives,
They were 60 years old when uprooted and destroyed,
You might make it to 100.
You are the link between the past and the future,
Magnificent in your stature,
So tall I cannot remember seeing your leaves
Amongst the dense shade.
You were there to tell the children of Iceland
How your relatives fashioned you into charcoal
To smelt iron and forge tools,
Axes to chop you down,
How you were felled to make way for hungry livestock,
Chewing away at your trunk
Until you were reduced to mere roots,
And how you were mixed with urine to make dyes;
Green, yellow, pink-brown and grey-green.
In the present your magic
Is said to thicken hair,
And even your name in feminine form, Bjork,
Is revered throughout the world,
But here in the Kjarnaskógur woods
Your role is to educate, adorn and purify,
But still you must survive those harsh winter winds,
While pondering over the future of your kindred roots.

The Mountain Spakonufell, Skagströnd, Northern Iceland;

The Future

Research of your location
In the future, suggested you would grace
The lower slopes of the mountain Spakonufell,
Back in Skagaströnd,
So that is where we looked for you.
How fitting that the future would be found
On the skirt of the Prophetess Mountain,

Named after a 10th century soothsayer who climbed the mountain
Everyday to comb her long golden hair with a gold comb,
Maybe we would also find the treasure Thordis hid in the mountain.
We cycled to the foothills, battling the winds from the north,
Undeterred by the Godwits attempts to distract away from their nests
With their close flybys and fancy fence post dances.
We discarded our bikes and started the long climb, following
The small yellow markers thoughtfully disguised by the foliage and rocks,
We passed a small pond with waving grasses and the unmistakable
Cotten Plant nodding in agreement with the grasses.
There were still the occasional rivulets of ice
Amongst the shade of the summer hills.
This was my friends' first climbing of the mountain,
And maybe the clearest day in a long while,
We could see all the way to the Western Fjords.

Soon to be concluded!