

MOLTEN MEANING

Frank Marquardt

ICELAND

Jim Krusoe

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To those like myself and Paul, the narrator of *Iceland*, who live in California-like settings, Iceland may seem to be a dead land, cold and distant, and so a fitting place to travel (if perchance your carpet cleaner offers you a free trip). Paul happens to meet a beautiful woman there, marries her, and settles down to his chosen career as a typewriter repairman. All this is made possible through Leo, the carpet cleaner, whose number Paul dials by mistake or, rather, intention—Emily’s phone number is smudged and Paul can’t tell if the number is a “3” or a “5.” Emily, of course, is the attractive woman at the Institute where Paul, who is dying of orgagenic disintegration, goes to select a new organ on Dr. Pearlman’s advice (we never learn which organ). Emily swims with the organs and hums to them (after scientific experiments, “it just turned out that those organs only really needed to keep in contact with the human body”), and soon after Paul meets her they make love. (First, however, Emily nets and disposes of a spleen.) Twenty-one years later, after Paul’s lost his Icelandic wife, Greta, in a tragic avalanche, Paul searches for Emily back in his California-like town of St. Nils. After various and sundry adventures, including time in the pen, he finds her by mistake—she is a proprietor of a pet store—and though it is unclear whether or not she remembers Paul, she does sell him a grave, most likely of the discount variety, and, book concluding, I for one consider it a gift from Krusoe to find Paul digging, as if the author has found the character’s proper resting place.

Death certainly figures prominently in this novel, and sex does too (at least one of Paul’s organs works fine!). In one sense, *Iceland* reads as a meditation on mortality. Paul spends much of the novel remembering conversations from his dalliance with Emily, such as the Icelandic folktale she reads to him about Sex and Death after they’d made love on a diving board. But to call *Iceland* a meditation on mortality hardly does it justice. It is, even more compellingly, absurd, its fantastical plot returning to the intimate musings of a philosophical and psychological nature that Paul remembers Emily sharing between lovemaking. *Iceland* is above all a playful novel, as inscrutable as it is fun to read.

Consider the men wearing heavy winter gear outside Paul’s St. Nils apartment. Paul watches them on the nights following his tryst with Emily when he can’t sleep; on the second night, one of the men is on all fours while the other uses him as a bench. In this, they resemble the members of the obscure Indonesian tribe which Paul reads about in the *Journal of Amateur Anthropology*, whose elders went to the hills surrounding the village, “built small fires and awaited the arrival of someone or something—it was unclear to the scholars/writers if it was a god or merely some low-level technological advance that the natives believed would help them to better organize their lives.” Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* comes to mind, and so does camping. Later, the men knock on Paul’s door and ask to use his phone; when they leave, Paul finds a picture of them modeling winterwear in an L.L. Bean catalogue. Could all this be a comment on the human predilection for meaning making?

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Puzzles like this show up throughout the book. Incidents are paired, clues scattered everywhere. It’s like Paul Auster has been hanging around—or Nabokov’s doppelgänger. Start, for instance, with the phone number Emily gives Paul that leads to his meeting Leo that leads to his trip to Iceland, or with the pairs of men Paul encounters, whose first names begin with a *D* and an *S*. Greta is an Icelandic stand-in for Emily. Leo weeps at Paul’s table after his wife dies—it’s her who Paul replaces on the trip to Iceland—and later, after Paul’s wife dies, Paul returns to St. Nils and weeps at his former landlord’s table. Before traveling to Iceland, Paul cleans his house and finds a flyer advertising discount cemetery plots, rather like the one he later buys from Emily. In Iceland, Paul tours a volcano with Leo; when Leo falls into it, Paul remembers “Emily’s exact words as she described her one in-home accident with boiling

water”: “‘I could see the pot,’ she had said, ‘and the fire, and even myself, as if the three of us were a story to be explored, a triumvirate of relationships so basic, yet enigmatic, that the only way I could understand them was to reach up, take hold of that handle, and pull it toward me.’”

Iceland creates a fiction so basic yet enigmatic that you can only reach up, take hold, and pull it toward you—and you’re still going to get burned, but it’s worth it. Krusoe writes with an effortlessness that is beguiling; his comic sensibilities attune, and the reader feels like Paul after Leo falls to his death: “What really happened, even to this day I cannot say with absolute certainty.” Krusoe’s use of literary device is as much the story as the plot; each detail seems to be a sign for something else. This can be good or bad, depending on disposition. Reading the *Journal of Amateur Anthropology*, Paul considers the curious tribal customs and their similarity to those reproduced on his street corner: “A feeling I was quite unused to slipped over me, of inexplicable peace, as if for the first time in my life there might be a plan, a synchronicity somewhere behind this world which, though it had eluded me thus far, might one day be knowable.” That’s pretty much how I felt about this book until I looked closer, like Paul examining the stain on his carpet, and “[s]uddenly what had seemed benign synchronicity had turned into a trap. But what sort of a trap, that was the question.” Everything may be meaningful, but not everything has meaning: Krusoe has quite exquisitely captured this vexing puzzle in this delightful work of art.

Frank Marquardt is co-author of The Unknown, an award-winning hypertext fiction. He currently lives in San Francisco, where he is writing a novel.