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ON TIME AND WATER

ANDRI SNÆR MAGNASON

Translated by LYTTON SMITH

'In the end, we will conserve only what we love,
we will love only what we understand, and we
will understand only what we are taught.'

Baba Dioum

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May you live in interesting times

'Take notice what you notice.'
—Thorvaldur Thorsteinsson

Whenever I host overseas visitors to Reykjavík, I like to drive them along Borgartún, a street I call the Boulevard of Broken Dreams. I point out Höfdi, the white wooden house where Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev met in 1986, a house that many people associate with the end of communism, the fall of the Iron Curtain. The nearest building to Höfdi is a black boxy structure, all glass and marble, that once housed the headquarters of Kaupthing Bank. Kaupthing's collapse in 2008 was the fourth-largest bankruptcy in the history of capitalism – not merely per capita of the Icelandic population but in net US dollars: 20 billion dollars.[1]

I don't mean to gloat over others' misfortunes, but it astonishes me that before middle age I'd already witnessed the collapse of two vast belief systems, communism and capitalism. Each had been maintained by people who'd scaled the peaks of the establishment, of government and of culture, people esteemed in direct proportion to their relative position at the pyramid's apex. Deep inside these systems, people kept up appearances right to the bitter end. On 19 January 1989, the East German General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party of

Germany, Erich Honecker, said: 'The wall will stand in fifty years' time, and a hundred years', too.' The wall collapsed that November. Kaupthing's CEO said in a television interview on 6 October 2008, after the bank had received emergency loans from the Central Bank of Iceland: 'We're doing very well indeed, and the Central Bank can be confident it will get its money back … I can tell you that without hesitation.' Three days later, Kaupthing collapsed.

When a system collapses, language is released from its moorings. Words meant to encapsulate reality hang empty in the air, no longer applicable to anything. Textbooks are rendered obsolete overnight and overly complex hierarchies fade away. People suddenly find it difficult to hit upon the right phrasing, to articulate concepts that match their reality.

Between Höfdi and Kaupthing's former headquarters there's a grassy lawn. In its centre stands a paltry copse of trees: six spruces and some woolly willow shrubs. Lying inside that cluster of trees, between the two buildings, looking up at the sky, I found myself wondering which system would collapse next, what big idea would be the next to take hold.

Scientists have shown us that the foundations of life, of Earth itself, are failing. The principal ideologies of the twentieth century considered the Earth and nature as sources of inexpensive, infinite raw material. Humans assumed that the atmosphere could continually absorb emissions, that oceans could endlessly absorb waste, that soil could constantly renew itself if given more fertiliser, that animal species would keep moving aside as humans colonised more and more space.

If scientists' predictions prove accurate about the future of the oceans and the atmosphere, about the future of

weather systems, about the future of glaciers and coastal ecosystems, then we must ask what words can encapsulate these immense issues. What ideology can handle this? What should I read? Milton Friedman, Confucius, Karl Marx, the Book of Revelation, the Koran, the Vedas? How to tame these desires of ours, this consumption and materialism that, by any and every measurement, promise to overpower Earth's fundamental life systems?

This book is about time and water. Over the next hundred years, there will be foundational changes in the nature of water on our Earth. Glaciers will melt away. Ocean levels will rise. Increasing global temperatures will lead to droughts and floods. The oceans will acidify to a degree not seen for fifty million years. All this will happen during the lifetime of a child who is born today and lives to be my grandmother's age, ninety-five.

Earth's mightiest forces have forsaken geological time and now change on a human scale. Changes that previously took a hundred thousand years now happen in one hundred. Such speed is mythological; it affects all life on Earth, affects the roots of everything we think, choose, produce, and believe. It affects everyone we know, everyone we love. We are confronted by changes that are more complex than most of what our minds typically deal with. These changes surpass any of our previous experiences, surpass most of the language and metaphors we use to navigate our reality.

Compare it to trying to record the sounds of a volcanic eruption. With most devices, the sound becomes muddled; nothing can be heard but white noise. For most people, the phrase 'climate change' is just white noise. Easier to have opinions on smaller matters. We can comprehend the loss

of something valuable, can comprehend when an animal is shot, when a project blows past its agreed-upon budget. But when it comes to the infinitely large, the sacred, to things that are fundamental to our lives, there's no comparable reaction. It's as if the brain cannot register at such a scale.

This white noise deceives us. We see headlines and think we understand the words in them: 'glacial melt', 'record heat', 'ocean acidification', 'increasing emissions'. If the scientists are right, these words indicate events more serious than anything that has happened in human history up to now. If we fully understood such words, they'd directly alter our actions and choices. But it seems that 99 per cent of the words' meanings disappear into white noise.

Perhaps 'white noise' is the wrong metaphor; the phenomenon is more like a black hole. No scientist has ever seen a black hole, which can have the mass of millions of suns and can completely absorb light. The way to detect black holes is to look past them, to look at nearby nebulae and stars. When it comes to discussing issues that affect all water on Earth, all Earth's surface, the planet's entire atmosphere, the issue's enormity absorbs all the meaning. The only way to write about the subject is to go past it, to the side, below it, into the past and the future, to be personal and also scientific and to use mythological language. I need to write about things by *not* writing about them. I need to go backwards to move forwards.

We're living in a time when thought and language have been freed from ideological chains. We're living in the time of that old Chinese curse, almost surely translated incorrectly, yet no less apt for that: 'May you live in interesting times.'

A little treasure

I graduated with a literature degree from the University of Iceland in 1997. That summer, I worked in the basement of the Árni Magnússon Institute for Medieval Studies. The Institute was behind a locked door on the university campus; for some reason, despite having studied in this same building for years, I'd never once gone through that particular door. It was a mysterious threshold, like the so-called elvish rocks where Iceland's 'hidden people' are said to live. I'd heard stories of people who'd disappeared through the door never to re-emerge. Inside, manuscripts of Icelandic sagas were housed alongside scholars who needed peace and time to pore over these treasures. Ringing the doorbell was so daunting that it felt more like pulling a fire alarm. I didn't dare push the button until the day I found myself filled with a burning desire to see what lay inside. I rang and was invited in.

Behind the door it was quiet and twilit; the air hung with a heavy smell of old books, a stillness that was truly overwhelming for a young man. I felt a pang of unease. I was here, inside, among the scholars of old manuscripts, some of them my grandparents' contemporaries. I was struck by

my own insignificance when discussions around the coffee urn turned to whether Thorvald had been in Skagafjördur in the summer of '86: I had no idea whether they were talking about 1186, 1586 or 1986. My fear that I'd be considered poorly read increased in tandem with my inarticulacy. I felt myself simultaneously (did I mean *concurrently*?) witless and ungrammatical.

I'd always done outdoor jobs in the summers – paving and gardening. I'd pitied office workers for having such little freedom. Inside the Institute, I'd catch myself looking out the window at my lightly dressed peers mowing the grass on the university green while my mind travelled further out, past them, into the wider world. John Thorbjarnarson, my mum 's half-brother, a biologist, had invited me to come and help him study the mating habits of anacondas in the Venezuelan mangroves. We'd also work with a team of scientists in the Amazon rainforest, counting crocodile eggs in the Mamirauá Sustainable Development Reserve as part of efforts to save the black caiman crocodile, *Melanosuchus niger*, the largest predator in South America.[2] The water level in the flooded forest fluctuates about ten metres a year,, so we would be staying in floating houses. 'It's no small joy to wake up in the morning to the sound of dolphins fishing right outside your door,' John remarked.

At the time, my girlfriend Margrét and I were expecting our first child; it would have been somewhat irresponsible of me to charge off on such an adventure. You might say two tracks diverged in my life. The train steamed off to Venezuela and on to the Amazon without me, leaving me a sort of bystander to my own existence, doubtful whether serious scholarship and the solitude of writing suited me.

One day, I was asked to document a manuscript exhibition in a small gallery on the upper floor. The philologist Gísli Sigurdsson was in charge of the exhibition; he told me to follow him to a hefty steel door in the basement, where he produced three keys. When he opened the door, I was amazed to see this was where the manuscripts lived: this was the sacred heart of Icelandic cultural history. I was surrounded by awe-inspiring historic gems. Inside were vellum manuscripts, the oldest of which had been written around 1100, depicting events from bygone ages. Inside were the original manuscripts of the Icelandic sagas: about Vikings and knights, about kings, ancient lawbooks. Gísli went to a shelf and opened a box. He brought out a small manuscript, and gently handed it to me.

'What's this book?' I whispered.

I don't know why I was whispering. It simply felt right to use a hushed tone in that space.

'This is the *Codex Regius*. *Konungsbók*, the *King's Book*.'

I felt weak at the knees, star-struck. *Codex Regius*, containing the Poetic Edda, is the greatest treasure in all of Iceland, perhaps even the whole of Northern Europe: the second major source of Nordic mythology and the earliest manuscript of the famous poems 'Völuspá', 'Hávamál' and 'Thrymskvida'. A primary inspiration for Wagner, Borges and Tolkien. I felt like I had Elvis Presley himself in my arms.

The manuscript was unassuming. Considering its contents and its influence, it ought to have been shining golden, resplendent. In reality, it was small and dark, almost like a book of spells. It was timeworn but not wizened, a beautiful brown vellum with simple, distinct lettering and almost no illustration beyond a few initial capitals. It offered the oldest evidence that a book shouldn't be judged by its cover.

The philologist carefully opened the manuscript and showed me a clearly legible *S* in the middle of the page. 'Read that,' he said, so I squinted at the script until I could read it myself: *Sól tér sortna sígur fold í mar* (The Sun goes dark, the lands sink, the shining stars disappear from the skies, the great ash will burn and fierce heat will lick the skies).

A shiver ran down my spine: this was Ragnarök itself, the end of the world as described in the original prophecy in the poem 'Völuspá'. The sentences were all in one continuous line, not broken up into verses the way poems usually are when printed in books. I was in direct contact with whomever had written these words down on the page over seven hundred years ago. I became hypersensitive to my environment, scared to cough, fearing I would drop it, feeling a touch guilty for even breathing this close to the book. Perhaps that was an overreaction; after all, this manuscript had been stored in damp turf houses for five centuries and transported on horseback in chests across surging glacial rivers; in 1662, it had been sent by ship to Denmark as a gift to King Frederick III. I felt an extreme sensation, a connection to deep time. I spoke practically the same language as the person who'd written the manuscript. Could it last another seven hundred years? Until the year 2700? Would our language and civilisation live that long?

As a species, humankind has preserved relatively few of its sacred ancient mythologies: ideas about the forces and gods that ruled the heavens and about the genesis and end of the world. We have Greek, Roman, Egyptian and Buddhist mythologies. We have the Hindu world view, that of Judæo-Christians and of Islam, fragments of the Aztec world view. Nordic mythology is one such world view; for that reason,

the *Codex Regius* is more important than even the *Mona Lisa*. Most of what we know about the Nordic gods, Valhalla and Ragnarök comes from this book. The manuscript is a never-ending inspiration, a wellspring for beliefs and for art. From it come works of modern dance, death metal bands, even contemporary Hollywood classics such as Marvel Studios' *Thor: Ragnarok*, in which Thor and his friend Hulk combine their might against the treacherous Loki, the giant Surtur, Hela and the terrifying Fenris Wolf.

I put the manuscript in a small dumb waiter and sent it up to the next floor. In the meantime, I galloped up a flight of narrow stairs to meet it. I set it with extreme care on a little cart that I pushed down a long corridor. I locked it securely inside a glass case, where it was protected like a premature baby in an incubator. That whole week my dreams were troubled. In them, I was usually downtown and had managed to lose the book. One time, I met a woman with a cleaning trolley walking along the corridor; I foresaw a cultural disaster, the manuscript falling into a bucket of soapy water and bobbing up squeaky clean, pages blank. A tabula rasa.

Marketing was not a strong suit of the medieval scholars at the Institute, so I spent whole days alone with these treasures while tourists shuttled out to waterfalls and geysers, to Gullfoss and Geysir. It was certainly privilege enough to hang out with this Mona Lisa of ours, but there was so much more besides. The Institute's foremost gems were also on display alongside the King's Book: Grágás, containing the Viking Age laws; Mödruvallabók, containing the major Icelandic sagas; Flateyjarbók, with its two hundred calfskin sheets and vivid illustrations. I sometimes stood over the

glass boxes trying to read the text on the open pages. The King's Book was the most legible, its lettering clear enough I could stumble through these ancient words: Ungur var eg fordum, fór eg einn saman (When I was young and set out on my own, I lost my way. I thought myself rich when I came into company. Man is a joy to man).

This was the same week Margrét and I rushed to the maternity ward in the middle of the night and I held my newborn son in my arms. Never had I handled anything so novel and so delicate. Nor had I handled anything so old and so delicate. I continued dreaming I was downtown, but now suddenly aware I was only in my underwear, and had lost both my son and the manuscript.

In the room next to the manuscript vault were more treasures: a hoard of tapes, recordings folklorists had collected all around Iceland between 1903 and 1973. There one could hear the oldest recording in Iceland, set on wax cylinder, Edison's Graphophone, in 1903. There were old women, farmers and sailors singing lullabies and chanting ancient rhymes, telling stories. I'd never heard anything so strange and beautiful and the thought flew into my head that it was urgent these ancestral voices reach the ears of the general public. My chief task that summer was to work with the folklorist Rósa Thorsteinsdóttir, compiling a selection from the archive so we could put out a CD.

Each time I threaded the black coils on the tape player and put on the headphones, I stepped into a time machine. I was in the living room of an old woman who had been born in 1888. The clock was ticking in the kitchen and she was reciting a rhyme she had learned from her grandmother, who

had been born in 1830, a rhyme she had learned from her grandmother, who was born in the late eighteenth century during the time of the great Laki volcanic eruption – a rhyme she had learned from her grandmother, who was born in 1740. The recording was made in 1969, so the cycle spanned nearly 250 years. It was from a world in which the eldest taught the youngest. The old-fashioned aesthetics of the rhymes differed from our idea of beautiful singing. The vocal tone and singing style did not resemble anything I'd ever come across. I collected samples on a reel and let my friends listen and asked them to guess where the music was from. They guessed Native Americans, Sami reindeer herders, Tibetan monks, Arabic prayers. When they had listed all the remotest cultures they could think of, I said, 'This was recorded here, in the Westfjords, in 1970. The man you hear singing was born in 1900.'

I played the recordings at home for my son when he was anxious; he calmed down as soon as the melodies started up. (I had half a mind to do a scientific study into whether ancient chanting has a marked sedative effect on infants.)

I was fascinated by the idea of capturing time. I realised how much around me would soon disappear, like the women on those slick black reels. I had five living grandparents and that summer I began collecting their stories in haphazard fashion: Grandpa Jón was born in 1919, Grandma Dísa in 1925, Grandma Hulda in 1924, Grandpa Árni (Hulda's second husband) in 1922 and Grandpa Björn in 1921. Theirs was a generation at an unparalleled turning point, born just after the First World War and living through the era of the Great Depression. They lived through the Second World War as well as many of the greatest changes of the twentieth

century. Some of them were born before the time of electrical lighting and machines, born into a society of poverty and hunger, even. Inspired by the reel collection, I decided to interview people close to me. I used a handy VHS video recorder, a Dictaphone, and then my smartphone once that technology arrived. I really didn't know what I was looking for, I was just trying to collect anything I could so that people in the future might appreciate it. I was making my own archive: the Andri Magnason Institute

A future conversation

I'm at Grandma Hulda and Grandpa Árni's home in Hladbær. We're sitting in the kitchen: the Ellidaá stream meanders in front of the house and people jog along the river path. A few snowdrifts linger on the slopes of Bláfjöll, yet the garden is in full bloom. I open my computer and load a video so I can show Grandma Hulda and my mother a film no one has seen in decades. I'd discovered an old 16mm cassette in their storage room and had converted it to digital. It was a movie Grandpa Árni shot in 1956, black-and-white and silent; the picture quality is perfect. Well-mannered children sit in the dining room here at number 3 Selás, this big white house my great-grandpa built on the banks of the stream. The children have little glasses of cola; Grandma Hulda appears, smiling, with a magnificent pavlova decorated with lit candles. At the end of the table, ten-year-old twin sisters sit together, laughing and blowing vigorously at the candles. Great-Grandma is there, too, dressed in traditional Icelandic fashion, watching it all. The next shot shows the children dancing in a ring in the yard; no doubt they're playing the

game 'In a Green Hollow'. Mum and Grandma Hulda watch the video and name the people the images have preserved. A child's birthday from 1956 captured on 16mm film is truly something. There isn't even footage of the Icelandic government from that time.

And here we are in 2018, sitting in the same kitchen more than sixty years later. Mum is over seventy, Grandma Hulda is ninety-four years old and my youngest daughter is ten. Grandma Hulda has hardly changed from how I remember her: she's only just given up golfing and her memory is still intact. A few years ago, a man who was trying to sing her praises to me commended how *sharp* she was. I acted half offended: *sharp*? What do you mean, *sharp*; she's always been a quick thinker. She certainly doesn't think of herself as elderly. Take her sense of humour. That's a beautiful shawl, I once remarked about a blue shawl she was wearing. Yes, an old lady crocheted it for me. Old lady? I asked. She laughed and replied: Oh, yes, she's probably ten years younger than I am!

The phone rings and Grandma Hulda runs to answer it. We sit down to eat pancakes as the radio hums low in the background. I ask Hulda Filippía, my daughter, to do a little maths puzzle.

'How old is your great-grandma if she was born in 1924?'

'She's ninety-four,' Grandma Hulda replies immediately.

'Fast maths,' I say.

'Well, I know how old she is.' She grins.

'All right, but now you'll really have to do some sums. When will *you* be ninety-four?'

'So it would be the year I was born, 2008, plus ninety-four?'

'Exactly.'

She takes a piece of paper and a pen and looks sceptically at the sheet. She shows me the result as though it must be a misunderstanding.

'Is that really right, 2102?'

'Yes, hopefully you'll be just as energetic as Grandma Hulda is now. Maybe you'll even be living in this same house. Maybe your ten-year-old great-granddaughter will be visiting, sitting with you in this kitchen in 2102, just like you are sitting here right now.'

'Yes, maybe,' says Hulda, sipping a glass of milk.

'One more equation. When will your great-granddaughter be ninety-four years old?'

Hulda writes some figures on a piece of paper, with a little help.

'Would she have been born in 2092?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'Okay, 2092 plus ninety-four … 2186!

She laughs at the thought.

'Yes, can you imagine that? You, born in 2008, might know a girl who will still be alive in the year 2186.'

Hulda purses her mouth and looks into the air.

'Can I go now?' she asks.

'Almost,' I say. 'I've one more puzzle. How long is it from 1924 to 2186?'

Hulda does the maths.

'Is it 262 years?'

'Imagine that. Two hundred and sixty-two years. That's the length of time you connect across. You'll know the people who span this time. Your time is the time of the people you know and love, the time that moulds you. And your time is also the time of the people you will know and love. The

time that you will shape. You can touch 262 years with your bare hands. Your grandma taught you, you will teach your great-granddaughter. You can have a direct impact on the future, right up to the year 2186.'

'Up to 2186!'