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Ófeigur Sigurðsson's *Öræfi: The Wasteland*, translated by Lytton Smith: a Review

The first line of Ófeigur Sigurðsson's *Öræfi: The Wasteland* prepares its readers for a journey of self-searching: "The glacier gives back what it takes, they say, eventually brings it to light." As I stood in the Skaftafell Visitor Center last summer, peering into a glass case of human debris from the 1953 British expedition on Öræfajökull, I could feel the glacial cracks in my bones. Broken tent poles. Pieces of clothing. Snapped skis. When the jökulhlaup swept those students away, a glacial rush of silt and water, it erased roads, street signs, buried cairns under snow.

From a distance, the Vatnajökull glacier seemed smaller, though it covers eight percent of Iceland's surface; but standing out on one of its many tongue glaciers, crampons digging for stability, the ice seemed to be all that ever was. On my way to Öræfi, I traveled with Sigurðsson's protagonist Bernharður Fingurbjörg across the south of the island, exploring its landscapes, environmental conservancy, and the history of death metal. Fingurbjörg, a toponymy student from Vienna, is conducting research for his doctoral thesis on place names and simultaneously searching for answers about his mother's experience at Mávabyggðir, a peak on the ice cap where the seagulls reportedly

roost. He is braving the glacier when he is viciously attacked by a wild sheep and forced to crawl all the way down to the same Skaftafell Visitor Center. There, his story is interpreted.

In Lytton Smith's translation of this Icelandic novel, place names become important markers, without which the protagonist and readers would be lost. Perhaps the most repeated word in the book is just that: *lost*. Fingurbjörg, who shares a last name with one of his destinations, admits early on that he is "going to Mávabyggðir to find [himself] because [he is] lost in the world." And so names guide like trail posts throughout the journey. Sigurðsson is clever, drawing connections to classic Icelandic literature like *Burnt Njal's Saga* and the *Poetic Edda*—naming a character after the latter allows the name-revering Fingurbjörg to literally have a romantic affair with poetry. Once we realize the wit behind character and place names, we find ourselves paying particular attention, constantly making connections to names and their inscribed meanings. Sigurðsson makes toponymists of us all.

As Bernharður moves from Reykjavík to Öræfi, he accumulates a band of companions. Each given a name that encompasses their identity, they teach Bernharður about the land he's traversing, offering impromptu and sometimes incorrect history lessons. The Regular, sometimes known as The Guest, is a particular mentor, getting the poet Bragi to provide Bernharður with a free collection of books—must-reads, according to the mentor. Bernharður lugs these with him in a bottomless trunk that follows him wherever he goes. He describes the trunk as "an extension of [his] body," and carries in it all his books, possessions, and cakes that his mother made for him to take on this journey. It even becomes a shelter, in which he can sleep, court Snorri's-Edda, and store his spices, especially his beloved caraway.

Sigurðsson's novel becomes a meditation on truth and fiction. As stories are told and retold, by Bernharður and a veterinarian named Dr. Lassi and an interpreter and the unnamed Auth., we must decipher and decide what it real and what is not. The Regular speaks to this in one of his rants, saying "the novel is the author's role, driven by fantasies and delusions, he shapes himself in fiction, finds his style and finally the style becomes the author's role, his character, the man himself is lost…" The novel is presented as a letter Bernharður has sent to Auth. A quite thorough, 200-page letter.

Formally, Öræfi rarely comes to a complete stop. The prose continues down the page in long sentences, often pausing only with the assistance of a comma, reminiscent of the *miðnætursól*, the midnight sun that stretches Iceland's days long and thin. The story, in this way, moves as though it is told directly through dialog, carrying on without pause; no matter how difficult the hike or painful the recited tale of Captain Koch's Greenland expedition, the plot pushes on into the unknown. This distinct form carries readers

through Bernharður's journey—through The Regular's rants, through the sheep attack, through the blinding erasure of a glacier.

Sigurðsson's novel is a clever, funny, and philosophical exploration of truth, land, and self. In the most basic sense, *Öræfi: The Wasteland* is the story of a tourist who comes to Iceland and falls into a crevasse. Along the way, we are swung around the twists and turns of human life—its truths and fictions—and led to question how we might make myth of our own lives.