

Snæfellsjökull

Peter Reasonⁱ

The early June dawn was approaching as the classic ketch *Tecla* rounded the Garðskagi lighthouse at the southwest corner of Iceland heading for Reykjavík—although in these high latitudes near the Arctic Circle and nearly midsummer, the nights remained light, with colours clear, if a little subdued. Our party of three permanent crew and nine ‘guests’—who had paid to work hard hauling on ropes—were at the end of a three-week voyage across the North Atlantic from Scotland. “That’s Snæfellsjökull,” said the skipper, gesturing to the northern horizon. “Dormant volcano. Jules Verne used it as the entrance to the underworld in *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*.” The three of us with him on night watch peered at the horizon, where we could just make out moonlight glinting on the icy peak of a cone-shaped mountain. But we were cold and tired after a night passage, more concerned to get *Tecla* safely moored in the harbour and fall into our bunks than with distant snow-capped volcanos.



Figure 1: Dawn approaching - Image copyright the author

Three days later *Tecla* resumed her voyage north across Faxaflói, the large bay that extends north from Reykjavík. Snæfellsjökull—literally ‘snow mountain glacier’—sits at the extreme western end of the narrow, mountainous Snæfellsnes peninsular that extends out from the main body of Iceland like a finger pointing west and forms the northern shore of this bay. On that bright, sunny day, the wind was brisk and cold from northeast, stirring up waves with occasional whitecaps. A heavy, steel-built ship, *Tecla* took the weather in her stride, heeling a little to windward and pitching in the short seas. Every now and then she would hit a wave square on her bluff bows with a thud, throwing up a shower of seawater. As her bows rose and fell, we caught glimpses of the volcano: at first diffuse in the distance, but increasingly clear as we approached. Fair weather cloud marked the line of the peninsular; at the far end the volcano appeared to rise directly out of the sea, its lower slopes grey, snow persisting in gullies from about halfway up, the icy summit obscured, then tantalisingly half-revealed as the cloud cleared for a moment. Approaching from the sea, Snæfellsjökull seemed to hold the same archetypal power as the Japanese artist Hokusai’s famous images of Mount Fuji.

It was late in the day when we anchored off Hellnar, an ancient fishing village sitting under the volcano with a small harbour and a cluster of houses. The skipper tucked *Tecla* in close to the coast, but shelter was poor. It is never easy, anchoring near mountains: the wind sheers around them and funnels down gullies, gusting in unpredictable ways. Not only that, they can create their own local ‘katabatic’ winds as cold, dense air drops down from the heights; such winds can be quite fierce. But *Tecla*’s huge anchor and massive chain held us securely, and it was quiet enough for us to enjoy a glass of whisky and dinner—roast lamb, no less. Even those who had found the day’s sail distressing for their stomachs recovered enough to join in.

Next morning the crew ferried us ashore to the harbour so we could explore the nearby nature reserve around the base of Snæfellsjökull. The rocky basalt shoreline is famous, with arches, pillars, and other spectacular rock formations: black and craggy basalt against a startlingly blue sea, still flecked with white horses; inaccessible beaches of round, sea-worn boulders; innumerable fulmars sitting on nests on ledges in the rocks. The volcano sloped up immediately inland, clouds blowing across its peak. As I walked, I kept looking up to the summit: just occasionally a fragment of brilliant white poked above the grey cloud.

When I turned to walk back, I realized the wind had increased dramatically; at times I was almost blown off my feet. Reaching the harbour, I saw the bay where *Tecla* was anchored covered in whitecaps, their tops blown off in streaks of foam. The crew were at the jetty with the dinghy to take us on board, limiting passengers on each run to just three. As we crashed into and over the waves, sheets of arctic-cold water blew up from the bows and smashed into our faces. I found myself gasping for breath each time a solid wave of frigid water sloshed over me, soon running down inside my waterproofs; it was the crew’s third soaking of the morning.

By the time I was back on deck having changed out of my soaking clothes, the skipper had the anchor up and *Tecla* under sail. Away from the coast we had magnificent views of Snæfellsjökull, now clear to the glacial peak. Its regular cone shape is flattened at the top, with two tiny peaks that one might imagine to be devil’s horns. All was calm again; *Tecla* rounded the headland well offshore, away, it seemed, from the influence of the mountains. Then, quite suddenly, the wind gusted and shifted direction sharply; the sails emptied, then filled again with a sharp crack; the heavy booms moved restlessly, then pressed hard against their sheets. Even under reduced sail, *Tecla* heeled to windward under the gale of wind dropping down the mountainside. The sea became a turmoil of white: short, sharp waves showing no regular pattern, their peaks blown off in streaks of spindrift. An eerie howl rose in the rigging. Rope ends streamed almost horizontal. Sheets of water blew over the bows and thundered on the deck. Sharp drops of water, shockingly cold, blew painfully into our faces, so most of us huddled

under our waterproof hoods staring downwind, hoping the skipper at the exposed wheel could see well enough. *Tecla* plunged round the headland and on northward. Then, quite suddenly, we crossed the boundary of the volcano's influence; the wind dropped right down, settling back in the north east. With the wild waves left behind, the ship pitched and rolled moderately over regular waves. Very soon the skipper called for the mainsail, and we were set to work hauling on the halliards.

All through that afternoon we sailed north across Breiðafjörður, the large bay between Snæfellsnes and Iceland's northwestern fjords. The weather stayed fine and clear, Snæfellsjökull remaining sharply visible astern. Mid-afternoon the skipper set watches so we could continue through the night.

As I was detailed for the middle watch, I turned into my bunk immediately after supper to catch some sleep. I knew it would be light as I climbed the companionway a little before midnight but was nevertheless surprised to see Snæfellsjökull still in sight over the stern. Now in the far distance, it seemed to hang mistily between sea and sky, almost glowing. Looking forward, I realized why: the volcano was lit by the deep red not-quite-midnight sun, hanging maybe ten degrees above the horizon, a little west of due north. It was so bright I had to go back to my cabin for my sunglasses.



Figure 2: Living Presence - Image copyright the author

Through the hours of my watch the sun gradually sank toward the sharp line of the northern horizon, then disappeared behind the cliffs of the Látrabjarg headland toward which we were sailing. And ever so slowly, Snæfellsjökull faded, until it was no more than a ghostly image, more imagined than seen. When I came back on deck in the morning, we had rounded the headland and the volcano was finally out of sight. A few days later, beginning my journey home, I caught a last glimpse of the tiny white cone that had so firmly entered my imagination under the plane's wing as I flew south to Reykjavík.

I feel that in some sense I *met* Snæfellsjökull. Not that we are close friends, more passing acquaintances, as when one chances to meet a celebrity: you may treasure the memory, even though knowing you passed through their life unnoticed, like a fragment of dark matter. I experienced a *presence* in Snæfellsjökull, an intimate relationship between the rocks and winds. Snæfellsjökull is more than a pile of basalt: with its glaciers gleaming white in the sunshine and clear northern air, the volcano is an awesomely beautiful being in the world. The winds are more than just cold air falling down the mountainside. They are wicked, weird, unpredictable, often chaotic, bitterly cold, with a life of their own, strangely disturbing to the human psyche. They defy a merely physical explanation.

Myths have, of course, grown up around Snæfellsjökull. It is said by some to be one of the great chakras or energy centres of the planet; by others to be a place where aliens have landed. The old Icelandic myth tells of Bárðr, whose mother was human but father half giant and half troll. He lived on a farm at the foot of the volcano, with his half-brother, Þorkell, living nearby. But in a family feud, Bárðr killed his nephews and fought with his brother. After this, he gave away his land and vanished into the Snæfellsjökull ice cap. He became known as Bárðr Snæfellsáss, the ‘guardian spirit’ of Snæfell, helping local people in time of real need.ⁱⁱ

Jules Verne’s novel, though written in a scientific age, echoes some of this. German professor Otto Lidenbrock’s account of passages in the volcano to the centre of the Earth was based on an imagined medieval translation of runic script of an Icelandic saga.

These stories support my experience that Snæfellsjökull is a living presence in the world. Of course, this makes no sense from a materialist perspective. The idea that I encountered some presence of the mountain is nonsense: it is wrong, misguided, mystical, suggesting a degree of eccentricity, if not downright insanity. The modernist view, harking back to the eighteenth-century philosopher Descartes, sees matter as *res extensa*, simply stuff extended in space, radically separate from *res cogitans*, the thinking self and the human soul.

I find a more congenial alternative to this materialism in a panpsychic view. This invites us to consider that all things, including the Earth itself, are integral to the fabric of the *living cosmos*, all of the same sentient cloth. The empirical world of physics is the outward appearance of a field of subjectivity; mind is a fundamental aspect of matter just as matter is a fundamental aspect of mind. This doesn’t mean that mountains think like humans, simply that sentience is a fundamental aspect of matter just as matter is a fundamental aspect of mind: we are part of a world that has depth as well as structure, meaning as well as form.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is a world of subjective presence. Beings in the world are self-ordering, autopoietic, and so have meaning for themselves. Together they form a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects, as ecotheologian Thomas Berry puts it.^{iv} This community forms a communicative order, an order of meaning, unfolding alongside the causal, material order. And this is necessarily a *poetic* order, taking place not in words and concepts but in image and metaphor; it is expressed through material form in a language of *things*. The winds around Snæfellsjökull can be explained by simply physics; they can also be seen as *expressive gestures* of the mountain.^v

We humans can be part of this poetic order: the world is capable of active communication with us, telling something of its nature and its being—if we ourselves are open to it. If we invoke the world as brute object it can only reveal itself as such. But if we invoke a living presence then we may receive a meaningful response.

I want to hold what may seem like contradictory truths. I want to enjoy my understanding of the eruptions that gave birth to the volcano, and of the physics that creates violent katabatic winds. And at the same time, although I can never ‘prove’ this scientifically, I want to be open to

the winds stirred up by Snæfellsjökull as poetic communication, gestures that point beyond material physics to the living presence of the world.

Once we stop seeing the world as mere stuff, but rather as imbued with its own meaning, it takes on a moral importance in its own right. No longer can we see it simply as ours to exploit. No longer simply Descartes' *res extensa*, our world becomes in some sense enchanted, even maybe sacred. To see the world is such a way requires that we humans change from the mode of heedless indifference and instrumentalism appropriate to brute matter to a very different one of sensitive attunement. And this, I suggest, is fundamental to an ecologically sound mode of human presence on Earth.

Notes

1. Peter Reason is Professor Emeritus at the University of Bath and Adjunct Professor at California Institute for Integral Studies. Former Director of the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice at the University of Bath, Peter is an international leader in the development of participative approaches to action research. He is co-editor of the *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice* (2001, 2013, 2015) and co-founder of the journal *Action Research*. Peter's books include *Spindrift: A wilderness pilgrimage at sea* (2014), *In Search of Grace: An ecological pilgrimage* (2017), and *On Presence: Essays | Drawings* with Sarah Gillespie (2019). Contact: peterreason@me.com. Online through www.peterreason.net.
2. O'Connor, R. (2002). The Saga of Bard the Snowfell God. In *Icelandic Histories and Romances* (pp. 109–138). Stroud: Tempus.
3. Many sources have drawn me to a panpsychic view over the years as I have sought to articulate a participatory worldview, including: Skolimowski, H. (1994). *The Participatory Mind*. London: Arkana; Berry, T. (1988). *The Dream of the Earth*. San Francisco: Sierra Club; Harding, S. P. (2009). *Animate Earth*. Foxhole, Dartington: Green Books; Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and the teachings of plants*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions. The summary in this paragraph draws strongly on Freya Mathews' 'living cosmos panpsychism' and onto-poetics as recently articulated in Mathews, F. (2019). Living Cosmos Panpsychism. In W. Seager (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook on Panpsychism*. New York: Routledge.
4. Berry's work evolved from his understanding of 'the interior presence... the livingness of things', but nowhere does he refer explicitly to a panpsychic perspective. The phrase '*The universe is composed of subjects to be communed with, not primarily of objects to be used*' is in Berry, T. (2006). *Evening Thoughts*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, p.149.
5. Here I am drawing on Freya Mathews notion of onto-poetics (Mathews, F. (2009). Invitation to Onto-poetics. *PAN Philosophy Activism Nature*, 6, 1-7). Also, Andreas Weber's poetic ecology which sees 'feeling and expression as necessary dimensions of the existential reality of organisms' (Weber, A. (2016). *The Biology of Wonder: Aliveness, feeling and the metamorphosis of science*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, p.3); Robert Bringhurst's view of the poetic as 'knowing in the sense of stepping in tune with being, hearing and echoing the music and heartbeat of being' (Bringhurst, R. (1993). Everywhere Being in Dancing, Knowing is Known. *Chicago Review*, 39(3/4), 138-147).