

MARBLE

Ally  
Bisshop

## Foreword (—forward!)

The very first image that declared humankind's victory over the Earth was *Blue Marble*. The ultimate aerial view – it was also a projection into the future, that contained with it all the submission of the past. A trumping of the 'natural laws' that had attempted to enslave us: chemistry, biology, gravity, velocity, relativity.

A triumph over matter.

*Blue Marble* gave us the Earth as a toy, a plaything: ours to roll about, ours to clink against others, ours to thrust forward in a decisive military ploy.<sup>1</sup>

] But, marble  
] ...  
] Marble is a thing  
] many things,  
] real and implied,  
] and whose realness or implication  
] depends upon  
] a certain perspective:  
] .  
] .

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<sup>1</sup> On December 7, 1972, the Apollo 17 spacecraft crew took an image of the Earth at a distance of 45,000 kilometers, an image that became known as *Blue Marble*.

- ] .  
 ] it is this blue planet, seen from above;  
 but before that, it was  
 ] a glass bead encasing a plume of colour,  
 like a trapped fish;  
 ] a metaphor for an anchored sanity;  
 ] the broad, white veins of fat in a folded  
 blade of meat;  
 ] ... /  
 ] and this rock,  
 ] this lost rock - torn from a specimen  
 board:  
 ] a soft and banded metamorphic  
 carbonic limestone.  
 ] / ...



Marble is also a movement:

*marbling,*

a fluid and  
 mercurial metamorphosis, written one way on the  
 surface of things, and another way beneath it.

This rock, this marble, is both the thing and the  
 movement; a form whose beauty writes (and  
 rewrites) itself through the patterns and marks  
 of its gestures of becoming. It is a condensation  
 of millennia of geologic events, compressed  
 and freckled together in the dark bowels of the  
 earth through endless concatenations of calcium  
 carbonate, pressure, calefaction and time. These  
 movements bear themselves out in the striated  
 patterns of its sedimented minerals: trapped now,  
 in this marbled body.

The thingness of marble is only a certain glazed  
 lethargy of the processes that write it. The  
 inventing, the *eventing*, of marble endures,  
 as we do.

Let me tell you a story, and let me place it in the world.

I live in Berlin, and have done so for almost seven years. Nonetheless, I speak German like a freshly yolked tourist, with a loose grip on a shallow and artless lexicon of words – the domestic and transactional terms necessary for commerce, travel, navigation.

Because I studied visual arts here in Berlin, my pedestrian Germanic vocabulary is also inflected with a strange and specific palette of sculptural, material and mechanistic terms: the names of tools, substrates, equipment and techniques for molding and experimenting with matter.

The German word for marble is *marmor*.

*Marmor.*

I imagine this word as it has travelled in time; losing edges and syllables as it rolled heavily along, composing itself with new accents and inflections in its slow murmuring.

Further south in Italy – the romantic and geologic cradle of marble – the word for marble is *marmo*. There, see! We've lost a letter as it rolled down the mountain, toward the sea, toward the seat of it all.

Marmor. Marmo.  
Murmur.

There's an expression I learned here, from a German sculptor of stone (*Steinbildhauer*). It goes like this:

*Steine haben Beine.*  
[Stones] [have] [legs]

Stones have legs. They move – sweeping, breaking, and folding themselves in time with a geologic rhythm that keeps no beat with our own. There are movements, endless movements through which stones continually take form, and take their place in the world – just as words do, just as we do.

This book walks itself with the legs of the stone: imagining the processes and fictions that those legs fold forward into the world. It tells a story of that journey, which is also a story of invention, of rupture, of fluid and unending metamorphosis.

It is a story told in three acts, which is actually one event, existing before, during, and after it was written. That is, it tells the story of process – which is the tale of a thing making itself, a thing unmaking itself, and the folded gestures in-between.

So, let me tell you a story.

Let me tell you three stories, and you can wend yourself between them – from Iceland to Italy, from Greece to Berlin, and home again, to this pocked and quiet mineral specimen board.

Let the stories walk you, like the stone.

Act one

# Mattering:

A thing making itself.



Wandering/wondering.

I begin this journey with a *détournement* – to Iceland. In truth, this opening arc is not a diversion, but it tells a tale that is unspecific to marble – a particular metamorphic limestone which, despite Iceland’s fiercely petrous and stone-ribbed geography, does not appear there. Rather, it is a tale about stone as geologic event, as fluid process, and about the kind of poetic sensitivity to the world that allows for the inventing and eventing of geologic matter to become apparent. It is a tale both unspecific to marble, and vital to it.

In the dark and woollen Berlin months of early 2011, we had, for a time, a guest teacher at our art school. Osk was an Icelandic artist who had made wanderlust her practice. It was a political practice, which all good art practices are, in the most hermetic – and axiomatic – of ways.

Osk would organise hiking tours to specific Icelandic sites heretofore unspoiled, and that had recently been marked for development: for excavation, for industrialisation, for that kind of economic violence that would flatten the curves of the land, dig deep into the frozen earth to claw out some rare and profitable dust.

The objectives of her tours weren't the most classically beautiful of Icelandic landscapes –

not the vast, pale and crackling shelves of ice that dissolve the horizon into the blind sky;

not the crumbling and mortal archipelagos of ice floe breached by black and glassy waves;

not the loping hills of stone-grass fields, whose waist-high blades twitch and worry like a horse's tail;

not the empty lake beds piled with cream-black larval pearls.

These were mute, wrinkled and unremarkable sites, thus sequestered from the public eye, and whose erasure was – as the thinking of the economic machine goes – less likely to be resisted.

By naming these sites *as* site, by gifting them the honorific of tourist ambition, by noticing them, Osk's practice transposed the value of these landscapes – from material economic resource to a different kind of aesthetic and cultural capital, written in the terms of its shivering wildness, in the fat and grisly gestures of its nonhuman elements. The intention of her walking tours was not to romanticise or memorialise that which

was soon to be lost, but – through this collective interest and re-valuing – to overswell the economic imperative to destroy.

I once heard the essayist Rebecca Solnit describe walking as an 'amateur act'. This is precisely what makes walking so sensuous: as an amateur act, it is closer to the originary, an experience less spoiled and overlaid with the ideations, expectations and categories of value of 'the expert'. When walking becomes untethered from destination, knowledge or need, its objective is the pure joy(!)<sup>2</sup> of wandering – an openness to the encounter, as it unfolds. If we allow it so, this kind of walking as sensory encounter can bring us into a primary contact with the affective possibilities of matter, of landscape, of all of the ecologies of our relations. It allows us to read the world with the eyes of a poet, with all of her raw and uncertain sensitivities, and all of her mythic suggestibilities.

To read the landscape in this wandering way – as sensuous, as gruffly lyrical, as an open and visceral address – is to allow that the geologic world has movements by which it expresses itself; that poetic accounts of the world's nonhuman figures

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<sup>2</sup> A Spinozan joy, the joy of expressing and molding thresholds of self and world; of swelling the form of one's own porous edges.

are only lexical translations of the already-given expressiveness of matter.

To walk in this way is to lose yourself in the gloss of the embrace.

Osk is not the only caretaker of Icelandic landscape, nor, it should be said, is ‘care’ a purely human domain. If we are to listen to myth – and in a land as shadowed and raw as this, lore sings a louder song than law – then we will hear that Iceland is also home to a different kind of creature that tends its slopes: the elves or hidden folk (huldufólk), who make their homes in the dark stones that scatter themselves on its surfaces.

(—the elves lend their stories to the stones; the stones press their tales into banded patterns of ore|awe.)

There’s a story I read last year about these elves, and the lithic folds in which they hide. The story is set in the north of Iceland, pinched into the crimps and knots of the mountains surrounding a small fishing town called Siglufjörður. In 2016, a section of Siglufjörður’s road unravelled itself in the heavy rains that soaked the fleeing coat tails of the late Icelandic summer. A road crew was

summoned to the site to repair the road, and set to work with heavy earthmoving equipment.

And then: the fissure that they tended became a wound, that rent itself into a terrible stream of strange violences. A nearby river over-spilled its edges, compelling an explosive mud- and rockslide that left a road crew member badly injured. Their proud and robust machines began to falter and break. A journalist who arrived to catalogue the damage sank into a thick pit of sludge, and had to be pulled to safety lest he be swallowed by the angry earth.

The crew puzzled over the growing chaos, which seemed incommensurate with the rains that had aroused it.

‘Nobody even thought of the stone’,

a crewman later said.

In the process of their work, the road crew had buried a large stone under a heaped pile of dirt and rubble – some 10,000 cubic metres of upturned earth. This boulder was the *Álfkonusteinn*, or *Elfin Lady Stone*, in which there lived a family of local elves.

The *Álfkonusteinn* was both the bruise and the balm for this anarchic scene. The elfin residents of this stone – now displaced – were held to have been levying a furious revenge on the road crew for entombing (and debasing) their lithic home. Eventually, after consulting with residents familiar with local elfin lore, the workers unearthed the buried *Álfkonusteinn*, and restored it to the hill where it had once stood. As a gesture of atonement to the elves, they cleaned the surface of the great rock with a power-hose.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> There are many examples of the spectre of the elves being evoked to interfere with landscape development in Iceland. In 2015, a road scheduled to run a course directly through the longstanding position of an elfin stone known as *Ófeigskirkja* (the Elfin Chapel) was put on hold as a result of protests convened by locals, interceding on behalf of the stone's hidden residents. Local 'seers' consulted with the elves living in *Ófeigskirkja*, who agreed to relocate for a week while the road crew moved the stone to another site.

That Icelanders could believe in elves and hidden folk<sup>4</sup> might not be a measure of their nostalgia or romanticism for mythology. Perhaps their elfin stories are a means by which to make vivid and legible the strange gestures of a fierce and unpredictable landscape. Theirs is a territory where glaciers sound themselves out with creaks, whistles and moans; where the smell of sulphur tells of fires burning deep in the earth below; where green arcs of light slope like pale ghosts across wintery skies. This brawny Icelandic terrain forces a raw, sensuous contact with the elemental and nonhuman, making possible the belief that this landscape might have its own agential force, or indeed, its own hidden personae.

A professor of Icelandic lore puts it more simply,

‘You can’t live in this landscape and not believe in a force greater than you’.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In a 2007 survey conducted by the University of Iceland, 62% of its 1,000 respondents thought that it was at least possible that elves exist.

<sup>5</sup> Professor Adalheidur Gudmundsdottir, as quoted in a BBC article, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27907358>