

As a parting gift from Stykkishólmur, where I spent a month this time last year as writer-in-residence at Roni Horn's VATNASAFN/LIBRARY OF WATER, its custodian Ragnaheiður Valdimarsdóttir gave me three small black stones. 'People around here call them "the pearls of Snæfellsnes"', she said. The smooth, shiny, rounded pebbles come from a beach at the foot of the Snæfells volcano that lies at the tip of the bone-shaped Snæfellsnes peninsula.

I rummaged through my hand bag for the three stones so as to show them to Joana Escoval on the eve of my departure from Stromboli, but all I could find was a larger green pebble from Paphos, Aphrodite's mythical birthplace on Cyprus. The stone has been with me since my fortieth birthday, which I marked by swimming on the spot where the goddess of love sprung from sea foam. Stones make for perfect mementos or talismans; I always carry one (and usually several) about my person.

Joana had just told me that she took a stone from Stromboli with her to Iceland and deposited it at the bottom of Snæfells, near the place where a track that can only be accessed by 4 x 4 vehicles forks off the main road and begins its ascent to top of the glacier. This gesture was her subtle way of linking the two places, the start and endpoint of Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. Had the "pearls of Snæfellsnes" been with me, they would have joined their distant relations on the black beach nearest to our temporary home – La Lunatica villa in the whitewashed Piscitá settlement – later that night, mirroring Joana's ritual in reverse.

As things stood, I decided instead to take a stone from the Aeolian island with me to Iceland. My intention was to drop it into the crater of Snæfells, if I ever made it up there during a follow-up residency at VATNASAFN/LIBRARY OF WATER. Things didn't quite go to plan. Getting around that part of Iceland isn't straightforward without a car and two weeks (my allotted time in Iceland) can easily go by without requisite weather conditions for making the ascent presenting themselves. I wasted a perfect day for a climb on the weekend following my arrival; the smooth snowy expanse of the summit with its distinctive chimney-like cones could be seen, gleaming white, from a boat bound for Flatey Island in the Breidafjörður Bay, taunting me from afar like a mirage.

It was a while before I felt confident enough to attempt the climb on my own, having initially been told by Filip, the sporty Czech man who works at the Volcano Museum in Stykkishólmur that he and his brother, an experienced guide, would take me there, weather permitting. They never did, and the weather was only partly to blame. But then the two of them did eventually procure some locally-sourced magic mushrooms for me, which we collectively failed to get hold of on Stromboli. Fungi and other vision-inducing plants whose roots go deep into the earth were meant to stimulate a "trip" to the underworld, different to one Jules Verne had imagined.

Unable or else reluctant to partake of these, we decided to experiment with shamanic drumming techniques inspired by Michael Harner's book *The Way of the Shaman* and brought to life for us by Geko, a long-standing resident of the island whom we met at the nearby plant nursery. Geko agreed to take us on a shamanic journey on the evening of our ascent to the craters. He walked back with us to La Lunatica, shortly after midnight, once we had come down from the summit, our heads still full of the eruptions. From a ridge overlooking the valley of craters, we watched, awe-struck, fiery cinders spouted out by different craters in turn settle down on the dark sand like snow flakes before they melted away into the surrounding darkness.

Perhaps owing to the fatigue of the five-hour climb followed by the descent through the Valle della Luna, where we waded through sand as if we were astronauts bouncing around on the surface of the moon, I was less focused on the shamanic drumming than I might otherwise have been. Geko's steady drum beat was designed to ease us into a trance-like state. To help us go down, we had to imagine an opening of some sort, such as an animal burrow or a cave, where we had been before. My mind kept flitting back and forth between various such openings, ones I had actually seen with my own eyes and others I'd only read about, leaving little space (and time) for the encounter with a spiritual guide – typically in the guise of an animal – to occur.

Not put off by this, I persevered in Iceland, armed with recordings of Harner's shamanic drumming that Geko had recommended to me. My second stay there coincided with midsummer, when there are no nights to speak of up in Stykkishólmur. I listened to the recordings for the first time in that eerie interlude between sunset and dawn, when the sun's afterglow can be seen shifting along the horizon, eastwards, before coming back up again a mere two hours later. Throughout this extended twilight hour one is on a natural high – without any help. And yet the experience and Roni Horn's forest of glacier-filled glass columns at VATNASAFN/LIBRARY OF WATER were made stranger still thanks to the contents of the dainty little metal box with an innocent rose motif on it – such as might hold sweeties – delivered to me just as my two weeks in Stykkishólmur were nearly up.

There were enough mushrooms in there for two people to trip on. I took the entire supply and waited patiently for it to take its effect. It did not take long – soon the clouds, the bouquet of wild flowers on the dining table and the wooden patterns on that table began to stir and writhe, as if they'd come to life. Everything I considered attentively repaid in kind. At one point, I took the stone that had travelled with me all the way from Stromboli and placed it in the middle of a postcard with an algae reproduction on it – one of a collection of eight given to me by a fisherman who harvests seaweed during my previous stay. Small and nearly black, the stone I found next to the wind-swept terrace of La Lunatica melded into the seaweed's feathery rusty-red foliage. I examined its uneven, porous surface, as if pricked by tiny pins leaving a shiny trail behind. Beneath it, the reddish fronds swelled and shimmered like waves. The outline of the seaweed

specimen, flattened out and pressed for a herbal or some such, recalled the shape of Iceland. Acting on a whim, I placed the volcanic stone in my mouth and let it roll around. I liked it there and how it felt against my teeth and palate. Its salty, mineral taste made me think of the sea. What if I swallowed it? This didn't seem like such a good idea and I put it back on its algae seabed.

Gaia's talk of artworks meant to be held in one's mouth may have brought on this particular episode of the six-hour-long trip, just as her vivid account of a chorus of frogs she heard during an ayahuasca ceremony in São Paulo goes some way to explaining why the spiritual animal guide I met on my third and last attempt at shamanic drumming was a frog. Daria, when I told her about it, thought it was no coincidence that my animal should be half-aquatic, at home both on land and sea. In contrast, the black lion she herself encountered at the drumming session Geko orchestrated for us on Stromboli (Daria was a natural, and got more out of it than any of us did then and there) was, as she phrased it, "100 per cent terrestrial, same as myself".

The day when my encounter with the frog took place was when I hoped to climb Snæfells – my last chance to do so, really, as I was leaving Stykkishólmur the following evening. Ragga (short for Ragnaheiður Valdismarsdóttir) had kitted me out with her walking boots, crampons, hat, gloves, lycra wear, the works. I was as ready as I'd ever be. But as the local public bus neared the glacier, it became clear that the ascent to the top would be pointless, even if I somehow made it up there. The summit, which I could see clearly a couple of days before (yet another missed opportunity...), was covered in a thick blanket of cloud and things looked pretty hopeless. "Our volcano can be shy," is how the guide who took us around the Vatnshellir lava cave put it.

This was my consolation prize: a vast underground space dug out by flowing lava 6000 to 8000 years ago. Clemens, the Dutch postman, first pointed the cave out to me back in October as we drove around the peninsula delivering mail – a handy way to discover the Snæfellsnes peninsula at a time of the year when public transport is scarce. Descending 35 metres below the ground, the lava tube was just as Jules Verne had described the corridors his heroes went down in *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. (A mock road sign at the bottom of a winding staircase pointed the way to Stromboli, some 3750 km away.) When you shone a torch light on the reddish black walls, they appeared to gleam. The guide explained to us this glow-in-the-dark sheen was given off by bacteria – the only thing alive inside an otherwise all-mineral environment.

It reminded me of the pocked shiny surface of the stone I brought back from Stromboli. I took it with me that morning so as to place it inside a crevice on the Snæfellsjökull glacier, hoping it would go far. (Filip had dispelled any notion I may have entertained of there being a gaping crater of some sort up there, such as the one through which Verne's characters access the Earth's interior.) After the visit of the Vatnshellir cave, I hitched a ride to Hellnar, the start of a trail leading to Arnarstapi, a small harbour at the foot of Snæfellsjökull. "Hell" in all those place names apparently means "gate" or "underground cave", in which this area abounds. The harbour master who gave me a lift back to civilisation later that afternoon insisted it's got nothing to do with the Norse goddess Hel and her eponymous underground realm where the dead reside, although I'd like to think the two are connected. The coastal path that winds its way among outlandish moss-covered lava formations at times comes pretty close to the edge of the steep cliffs, from which one can peer down into some sea coves carved out by lashing waves.

I contemplated flinging my stone into one such whirlpool right beneath the Snæfells volcano, but I thought better of it. For who knows where it might have ended up that way? Maybe back where it came from, if a friend's spin on Henri Poincaré's recurrence theorem – according to which things inevitably return to their point of departure after a long but finite time – is anything to go by. Instead, I found a matching black basalt rock overlooking a pool of deep blue, framed by a natural arch, a gateway of sorts, and slotted it into a gap in the stone. It had reached its journey's end.