

Icebergs and Rocks: writing the plutonic landscape

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The poet, Elizabeth Bishop, in a letter to the poet Marianne Moore, described words as *'things' in the head, like icebergs or rocks or awkwardly placed pieces of furniture.* I have always been struck by that thought – that words are objects to be navigated. Words present an encounter. They are complicated. They get in the way. They are clutter. They are material and their materiality might be fluid. An iceberg might look like a big rock – it might appear rocky – but it is not a rock. It is an enormous amount of frozen water the size of a small country.

There is a relationship in that sentence between the material world of the outdoors and the stuff of the domestic. As Bishop puts it, the head is a zone filled with things to be described, the words in it, like cupboards, sofas, tables, chairs are objects through which you articulate the space of your existence. Moving the furniture. Making changes. Rearranging. And then there is the long, enjoyable stretch between the concept of an iceberg - a gigantic, blue-white vision that might sail past your window - and the wooden bench on which you sit to look at it.

As Bishop describes them – these words-as-things – are all big and solid. Iceberg. Rock. Furniture. She does not say words are things in the head like saucepans or hats or pieces of misplaced cutlery. She does not list things you might be able to tidy away in a cupboard. The words she chooses, look up, across and out. The object she names have agency. They have clear object status. If words are things, in order to move around freely, you will either have to go around them or move them out of the way.

And there is the idea, implicit in the sentence, that things in the head might constitute a threat. Hostile. The space of one's own head is private, protected, inviolate. A rock in the head is an aggressive proposition; a brick thrown through a window. A thing in the head could be an obstacle. A tumour. A wound. The whole passage speaks of the difficulty of writing – as a kind of congestion – and it reads:

I have that continuous uncomfortable feeling of things in the head, like icebergs or rocks or awkwardly placed pieces of furniture. It's as if all the nouns were there but the verbs were lacking – if you know what I mean. And I can't help having the theory that if they were joggled around hard enough and long enough some kind of electricity will occur just by friction, that will arrange everything.

We can only pray for such a thing ...

Bishop was writing to her friend Marianne Moore in 1940. I came across the letter when I was writing my book, *The Iceberg* in 2014. I didn't call my book *The Iceberg* because I found the letter. The book was already called *The Iceberg* when I came across it, but I was very glad to find it. It made me happy, because it chimed with my understanding that ideas might be expressed in language as physical, material entities and that language – in the form of a sentence, its order and structure - is a constructed object with material qualities: weight, surface, grain, speed, friction, mass, density and force. And because Bishop's observation seems very much to be talking about the sculptural properties of words.

Much of my activity as an artist – a sculptor, video maker – has been spent thinking about constructed objects with material qualities and what happens when we encounter them. And much of my most recent work has been occupied trying to fashion such encounters – with objects, with the experiential world – in language.

I should say that my book *The Iceberg*, has nothing to do with icebergs. My husband, who was the art critic Tom Lubbock, died in early 2011 of a brain tumour in the left temporal lobe, the area of speech and language. *The Iceberg* is a close account of the time of his dying. It is written in numbered sections. It concerns language and its loss, love, the nature of belonging and the ethics of end-of-life care. It was a very extreme time. The outside world is presented in the book as a major, unstable player in experience. It is structured in scenes, using time-based tropes such as the interval or cut in editing.

Text as visual and language as picturing were important aspects of the writing. Artworks are frequently encountered or discussed within the book as objects through which to navigate experience. Here is a passage from *The Iceberg* about the nature of instability, which focuses on one work – Barry Flanagan's, photographic work, *A Hole in the Sea*.

If you imagine a hole in the sea and the energy required to maintain it, it might be a bit like this. Barry Flanagan came up with this idea, A Hole in the Sea, first as a print and then as a video in 1969. His conception looks anodyne in itself: serene. But it allows you into such a phenomenon. You can imagine the rim of a hole in the sea as the most untenable place in the universe, an impossible stop in a perfect continual broil seething with supernatural force. Of course it would not be a hole but a tube. A tube is a hole all the way down. In Fantasia, the Magician banishes the waters in great cymbal crashes, forcing apart dramatic crests of white cartoon spume. Charlton Heston as Moses in The Ten Commandments worked through exhortation and fear to lead his people through the sea. His waters don't dare to close until he allows. The parting creates a neat edge, like a celluloid trench dug with a spade.

Porthole



So here is this porthole and we have been looking through it for a while. You will be thinking – *Where the hell are we going now?*

Just under a year ago, I went for six weeks on a residency program to Fogo Island, through *The Islands Arts Writing Residency*, an Arts programme split between Fogo Island and Toronto Island in Canada. Fogo is a pink granite rock in the North Atlantic, off the coast of Newfoundland. If you cross the Atlantic from Ireland it will be one of the first things you hit – if you are lucky. It is 3,557 km from Leeds. It has a population of 2,500 and was formerly entirely dependent on cod fishing. It is a precarious place. In the 60's it fought off a resettlement threat from the Canadian mainland. On Fogo they are having to think hard about sustainability, climate change, a dwindling population and how to preserve a way of life. They are a small enough community that sometimes their thinking can take the form of whole-island public meetings. In a radical attempt at reinvention aimed at drawing in eco-tourism, it has built an architecturally fabulous, state of the art luxury hotel. In another bold move, intertwined with that, Fogo has an active and dynamic residency programme with an international reach.

I say / went there, but in fact it was not just me. I am a single parent with one son who is now twelve. Fogo – like all remote islands – is highly dependent on community. Artists live and work within families and communities. They carve their workspace out of family life. A child is a good route to immersion in community,

though not without difficulty. It was the first time that I had gone on a working residency with my child. In case you were wondering – he had a total blast.

In this talk I am going to read some short texts from a work in development called *Pluton*. Pluton consists of forty texts paired with forty photographs. I took all the photographs on Fogo or on the neighbouring Change Islands. The book will be published by Art Metropole in Toronto this autumn (2019). Not all the texts were written on Fogo, though most were. Not all of the texts directly concern Fogo. But they centre on aspects of the material landscape and on measures of distance – temporal – geographical – conceptual. I wanted to write across axes of near and far; the rock and the horizon, objects in the hand and ideas in the head, people near and people held close in absence. The stretch between the furniture and the iceberg. The texts are all extremely short. Here are five.

15 October 97 – 15 September 17

Cassini goes quiet at 7.55 am. A death foretold to the nearest second. The announcement, triple-checked, comes without overt inflection. Pictures of Saturn gleam on screen: like porcelain, like milk, like ice, like wax, like silicone. Porcelain, milk, ice, wax and silicone: the five ingredients for life. Afterwards, the scientists rise, they stretch and move their jaws in talk. It could be a conference coffee break. There's a smattering of applause, if only out of courtesy. Quiet hugs. Jonathan – how are you feeling right now?



Everything happens in some place. That's what the man said, and it's true. But the things that happen can be minute, so small as to be unnoticeable in themselves, so it can seem as if nothing at all is happening, and time is rendered as a certain spaciousness or lightness. But taken together, the things that happen coalesce and teem elsewhere, like a school of capelin on open sea, the capelin that will fatten up the cod, and turn them one year from meagre pickings to gorged with food the next. And if you wait, everything is visible a season on. Nature rolls over. That is the real mystery. We are forever in arrears.



In the museum – they are in the museum again – they watch a video about liquefaction. When an earthquake hits, soil below the water table can become saturated and lose its grip. It can flow like liquid, taking boats, cars, houses and hillsides with it. Sometimes on museum trips she steeled herself to take in nothing at all, but liquefaction broke through her defences. Dissolution was a state she had sympathy with. A child interrupts the video by screaming and arcing in his father's arms as if to throw himself violently, head backwards, to the ground. The father is resolute. He watches to the end. There are three types of tectonic plate movement: Divergent, Convergent and Transform. Later, the child rehearses them in the bath, setting the water against the movements of his tummy.



Maps do not do justice to coasts. On a map, the coast is relegated to the edge, giving the land priority, and the sea – Pantone 17-5513 TCX – designates its absence. A coast is a line on a map. But coasts are whips, not lines, and violence does not sit with being neatly coloured in. To be accurate, each town would twin with its weight in water, and take in a corresponding area of sea. Then the all-important shore would not be relegated to the edge, but figure as an ever-shifting centre, around which the proportions of a town would wrestle from day to night. In flit, grey light, it is an even match. By night, the town appears to shrink, and the sea, vast beyond the defensive lines of boats, swoops in. By night, a sea's darkness will suck the wicks from the candles and drag the children from their beds. There is no end to what the sea takes. Maps are silent on these dramas.



The geologist says he doesn't know when the rain will come. I don't know why I asked him, confusing perhaps geology with meteorology, as if knowledge of rocks has made him also a master of prediction. He answered out of politeness, but his guess is as good as mine. Clouds on the hill are massing. Rain hits within ten minutes on the trail. Lichens swell. Pines take in water. The granite blots to ever darker pink. Alpines and low-growing shrub mark the subarctic fauna. As we climb, the plants get shorter, as if in climbing, you truly leave all height behind, and move towards a final, scoured flatness, where nothing withstands the wind, and the ultimate surface texture is velvet.

Geology – a compacted landscape

Fieldwork in geological terms is the collection of raw data in the environment. Geology became a major player in the writing of *Pluton*. It is unavoidable. Fogo Island is a 420 million-year-old chunk of the North American land mass sticking out of the ocean. The rock is a live entity and deserves to be written as such. There is a pioneering program called *Geology at the Edge* on the island, and there are regular geologists in residence throughout the summer. The work of understanding the rock and the specificity of its formation is live and ongoing.

The landscape is small – 25 x 14 km – and compacted in its material content, being composed of three kinds of rock—volcanic, igneous and sedimentary. Those material qualities determine what grows there and impacts on those who live there. The landscape; rocks, dust, plants, ground and edge points where sea meets land are a historical archive of geological activity over time.

My writing which was always quite compact anyway, became even more so. The work took the form of a set of micro-texts arranged in ascending word order of between 30 to 300 words – so going roughly from one line to one page with the work expanding into the page it goes. I am very keen on compression: few words shifting a lot of weight. I am not hugely interested in narrative. I am not trying to tell a story. I want the words to show as much as to tell.



In the lives of rocks, the temptation is to think of geologic time as in the past, and of geology as history, with its early, tectonic phase of crashing continents, reducible to a lurid graphic, over and done. This is clearly not the case, but lives, as we know, are short. Short-termism is not the only problem humans face, but it's a big one.

It may yet be our undoing.



What is the weather like in Minecraft?

Lightning may be summoned manually.

Fish are agitated after rain.

Leaf fall is restricted.

Land is readily hydrated.

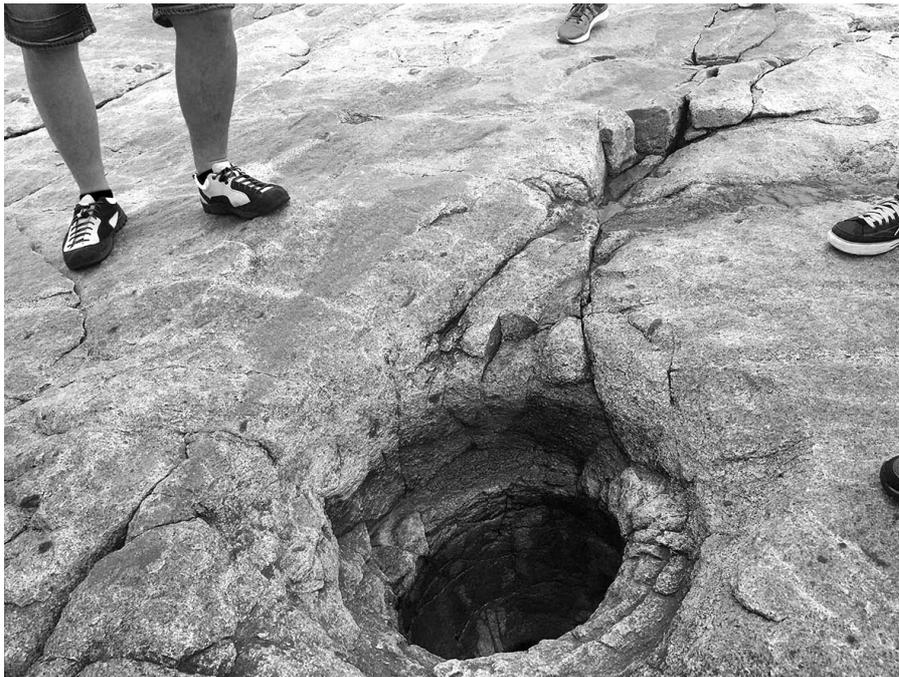
What is the sea like in Minecraft?

Whales carve out replicas in water.

Sea levels are maintained.

Underwater visibility may be adjusted.

Tridents can be re-enchanted.



The image of the asteroid Ida, with its own satellite, Dactyl, the first confirmed satellite or moon relating to an asteroid, closely resembles an image from Donald Burgoyne's Rock series from 1968. This does not mean that Donald Burgoyne prefigured this discovery. But you could say there is nothing new under the sun. Or in this case, far from it.



When your child is 35, there will be no more Arctic sea ice in summer.

That was Dr Birch, on the crossing over to the island. Nothing had changed, but the sea, a minute ago, so bright, was now dead like lead.

When your child is 35, there will be no more Arctic sea ice in summer.

Do you want to hear that line again?



The intern described the photograph they made the previous season, flying a drone along the point of contact where rock morphs into mushroom pleats. Granite v gabbro: the land that was liquid. She imagined the image unfurled, weighed down for inspection with medium stones. At 12 metres, no table would take it, so the landscape fell in curls straight from the printer: smooth as a kitchen worktop freshly wiped, all grain reduced to gloss, all surface, slide. She wanted to run her hand along the slipstream, brushing the lichen, succulents and grasses, poking the moss back into the crevices and fingering the seams of bog.

She asked to see it many times and it was promised, but it never came. The cardboard tube was empty. It had been moved from the drawer. It had gone back to the city. It had been cut down into sections. It had been damaged in the flood. It had been stolen. It was never that big anyway. No one could remember.

The photograph was never found. She came to doubt it had existed.

Seas

There are a lot of images of the sea in the book. Here is one.



When asked in an interview who his audience was, the artist Félix González-Torres replied, Ross. The public was Ross. The rest of the people just come to the work. It's a hard sentence but a good one. An audience of one is enough. Ross was Ross Laycock, FGT's lover, who died of Aids-related complications in 1991, as five years later he would also die.

Under the bed was one of his prints rolled up in a tube. It was a broadsheet image of the sea, free to take from the stack, Félix González-Torres, "Untitled", 1991, offset print on paper, endless copies. The piles went down and were replenished every evening to a certain height. The work would not run dry. A water column is an imaginary monument. It goes all the way down: epipelagic; mesopelagic; bathypelagic; abyssopelagic. This had none of a monument's usual conditions, being made of paper and subject to change.

And to lose your audience of one? That was the whole sea and its depths.

Photography and fiction

Taking photographs as part of my practice is a relatively new thing for me and this is the first time I have published a work of words and images together. The images I made on Fogo are a fiction. Fogo is not a black and white island. The sky was mostly – and unusually – a blazing blue while we were there. In the images and in the way I treated them, I turn the island into something like an artefact made of congealing lead, emphasising the hammered quality of experience, the bare rock, the sun beating down, the wind driving across. It is an exposed environment. For all the extremity of its beauty, it can be very harsh. We did not even see winter. Winter is a very different thing again. Fogo is often cut off for long periods by pack ice.

The inhabitants are often alluded to in the writing but appear in the photographs only marginally. They are not directly pictured. I don't document them in any formal sense. People are cropped, shown at a distance or – as in this case - upside down. They remain mysteriously out of view. The land, the edifice of the island is the major player.

I am going to end with four texts which centre on human activity on and off the island.



In the department called Foot Health, I am fitted for a pair of insoles. Fitted is an exaggeration. Handed. The department called Foot Health is empty, save for some large reclining chairs. When I arrive, the nurse tells me the insoles are in another department. It will take him 20 minutes to bring them back. He suggests I make myself comfortable and read. He is right. It takes him 20 minutes. I don't have anything to read.

So in my imagination, I follow him. Right out the door, down the corridor to the lift that goes up only to the even numbers, up four floors and through the swing door into a connecting corridor, past Lung and Chest, and on to Bloods, down the lilac corridor where the mobile library is temporarily located, and into the cool green-blue of Resources. I track the layout of the hospital on foot. He walks slowly. When he returns, the insoles make me feel taller. No other advice is given.



The neighbour lives opposite the island where the two-year-old is buried, the one who drowned last year.

In most weathers she can pick out the grave. As she speaks, she hands me the frozen slabs of cod she promised in a zip-lock bag, her kindness coexisting with this loss, so proximate, as if there were some life lesson in the interface, but what it might be I would not know. We gauge the span of water side by side.

Sometimes you are given facts and must accept them.



She was an owner, not a renter. In her portfolio was a house and a grave. The property market was volatile. Only the grave seemed solid. How had this come about? For sure, there had been no plan for either. Some make plans regarding property, but she did not. You might say she was a fool.

In childhood, houses had come and gone. She loved them with the conviction of the child and the fierceness of the settler. Transience was the norm. She did not fear it. The house was for now, the grave, for later.

Of the twin plots, one was of a certain size with bedrooms. The other, eight foot by three. The smaller might be extended one foot along its narrow end by addition of a planter or trough. Conifers, shrubs or other spreading plants are not permitted without prior approval.

Within the terms of the lease, 100 years, it was hers. But deep in the small print, conditions worsened. Under the ground was water: mudslides elided into sinkholes; subsidence into floods. She was cheered to find a document so prone to collapse. The lease excluded only property developers: the most feared.



The community had come together to serve tea and soup and sandwiches. Twenty-four chairs were set around the table but the number was expected to be more. Garlands of pink and purple, left over from a child's party, hung from the ceiling. A ladder had been difficult to find so it was decided the garlands should stay and the effect, over the long table, was of a wedding before the guests arrived. One wall was hung with dartboards under shutters. Winter was a long season of nights indoors. Aside from the garlands, the hall was bare.

The hall, under threat three years ago, was now in the hands of the community: they were glad to open it when they could. Many were extended family. They formed into a committee for the running of it, and by consensus the arrangement was a good one. The drawback was that previously they had set up all events themselves. Now everything had to go through the committee.

The community was close. In the street they seemed to greet each other without speaking. Their eyes would miss each other's faces and fix out over the water as if all courtesy extended to the sea. In passing cars, they raised their hands. In boats, the same. Only when meeting children, dogs or strangers did they become animated. Then, their eyes locked landward.

Fogo is in a stretch they call Iceberg Alley but we never did see Icebergs. We arrived in late July. The season for icebergs is Spring, between April and June when they come down the North Atlantic between Greenland and Newfoundland, gigantic monoliths of ice heading for open sea. There might be strays still to be seen very far out in July but the big ones that go by like cruise ships were gone by the time we arrived. The icebergs were in my

imagination. What took my attention, and what I tried to write, were the constants: the band of the sea, the material of the rock and the horizon like a wire that bounded everything.

Elisabeth Bishop grew up in Massachusetts and Nova Scotia. She was very familiar with icebergs. Her poem *The Imaginary Iceberg* (1935) starts with a great line, which seems to ring very true, especially now –

*We'd rather have the iceberg than the ship,
although it meant the end of travel.*