

A Letter to My Future Child

By Tala Abu Rahmeh



My dearest future child,
I have been thinking about you a lot since I arrived in Iceland. Whenever I experience anxiety, I think about my belly, one day, swelling to house you, and the thought of you warm and growing comforts me.
I have been living in this small town in the north of Iceland for a month and a half now. The town is called Skagastrond, and it has a population of a little fewer than 500 people. It has one supermarket that sells everything from Icelandic knitting wool to cup noodles, a gas station that sells gourmet chocolate and

less-than-gourmet burgers (with very American names like Hollywood and Las Vegas), one restaurant that comes alive with songs and wine served out of converted maple syrup bottles on the weekends, and a half bank/half post office establishment that takes a break between 1:30 and 3:30 pm everyday.

I ended up here to do an art residency, where I work ten hours a day at a fish-factory-turned-art-studio right by the ocean, where from my desk on most days I see the waves collide with the rocky beach. Iceland is a place where you can marvel at the magic of the world. The mountains surrounding the town are black and covered in snow, and the wind envelops you to remind you of who runs the sky. It has been icy for days now and you can see water locked under patches of stiff ice when you walk. I keep trying to crack them but I mostly just fall.

I still don't know why I'm really here. I quit a teaching job I really loved because the people in charge were breaking my spirit, and I packed my bags and found myself in Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland, walking alone in unbearable cold and trying to understand where my life is going. I'm 30 years old, I write poetry, I love teaching, and I really just want to be happy.

"A Letter to My Future Child" is about a journey to Iceland, describing a town of fewer than 500 people and a time of exploring oneself at an art residency. Iceland is a country that holds great beauty and mystery, but what does one do with that when confronted with loneliness and nightmares?



When I arrived in Skagastrond I struggled with the definition of happiness. After all, what does it really mean? I kept pondering my loves and losses and I felt nothing but an all-encompassing loneliness. I am so fundamentally alone, and I feel it equally in the middle of Times Square and in the silence of Iceland. So what is it that I'm looking for? Love? Words? Hope?

When I first arrived I cried a lot. I thought about your grandmother and how much I missed her, and I thought about how much I'm terrified of losing everybody else I love. I thought about what is taking your father so long to find me, and I pondered everything until I got really hungry and ate ungodly amounts of locally made cheese. I have so far tried Gouda, Havarti, Feta, Jalapeño cream cheese, pepper-infused hard cheese, and some orange-colored "Mexican" cheese. I have also consumed approximately seven liters of milk, four loaves of whole wheat bread, and an undisclosed number of

locally concocted hazelnut and caramel infused chocolates. Everything tasted like it was made by elves. Everything filled my belly and strengthened my spine against the wind.

Every time I felt full I thought, maybe this is happiness.

I have also been walking a lot, and watching the belly of the ocean unfold like a hungry whale calling all the water in then spewing it out. I have never been near a cold ocean, and my inability to take my boots off and dip my feet in the crystal water alters my relationship with it. For now I keep my distance and try to see it for what it really is, a humongous body that carries tires and sharks and could potentially throw either of those things in my direction.

This place is cruel in its own way. Iceland is the fourth-happiest country in the world, even though it constantly radiates a spirit of naked survival. The rocks etch a history of a people who sailed across tough waters to find a new home. There must be a reason people here eat fermented shark meat and the entire body of the lamb, a reason I reckon has to do with cold inserting itself in every crevice of their lives and leaving them grand and exhausted.

Maybe by the time you read this its population would have doubled, but for now, Iceland is home to 300,000 people in total. The scope of the population could be measured by the naked eye, and the language sounds thick and rare, and yet Icelanders translate every single book that makes as much as

a whimper in the outside world. Moreover, their houses are all geothermally heated (look that up, lazy), and they recycle everything except glass. Surprisingly though, they cut down all of their trees in the 70s for heating purposes and never planted more.

Iceland also claims to be the closest country to Mars, verified by a fellow artist who spotted it while out a few nights ago. I choose to believe she saw it. I also choose to believe that it's the closest country to the core of the earth, and its energy is different, because I've been having bad dreams every single night since I got here. I've been dreaming about my grandfather in a green suit, my

grandmother baking bread, and my mom half sleeping on a couch. These might not sound like nightmares, but the fact that I wake up confused about whether the people in them are dead or alive terrifies me.

Bad dreams don't linger too long though, and most of the time I get up in the morning feeling grateful to be alive, to be walking through windy streets without falling, to be brave enough to get on planes and go to strange lands where I don't know a soul, and end up meeting people who fill my mind with stories, kindness, and curiosity.

I befriended Helena, the nine-year-old daughter of one of the many marvelous artists here, and one day we were talking about the sulfur water that stinks like rotten eggs, and I said to her that I don't mind the smell as long as it cures the few scars on my face. She looked at me and said that she loved them because they made me who I am. At that moment I felt a pain the bottom of my stomach and I prayed that you'd love me too, exactly the way I am.

I wish you your own Iceland, tough on your skin and heart, to strengthen you against the inevitable spurts of growing up, and to remind you that love is equally present in wind and in absolute still.

Tala Abu Rahmeh is one of the content editors for This Week in Palestine. She writes poetry and non-fiction and is currently working on a poetry manuscript titled "Amreeka." She holds an MFA in poetry from American University in Washington, DC. She is a regular contributor to Mashallah News Magazine in Beirut and Wherever Magazine in New York City. Her poems have been published in a number of magazines and books, including Naomi Shihab Nye's Time You Let Me In: 25 Poets under 25. Parts of her memoir-in-progress were published in a non-fiction book about Beirut titled "Beirut Re-collected," available in both French and English. Her poem "Cape Cod" was just nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

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