

Iceland

In the massage room Tessa is stretched out on the table, eyes closed. The girl who is massaging her grabs her by the heels. Tessa falls asleep, she dreams of being completely covered with a fine substance, like salt. Blue salt; fog, gray and pale blue. She sees before her: a girl, sitting cross-legged, her thin, dark body etched by the outlines of her muscles; her breasts are naked and show signs of bite marks, maybe by vipers. She is wearing pants and fur boots. Her lips are almost black, her hair matted with fatty seal oil, her face painted with mud and ash. Around her is an unbroken stretch of sand and asphalt, an expanse that becomes covered with mud when it rains, then the sand freezes. The girl, Tessa thinks in the dream, is the bearer of ice: she lays a finger on Tessa's lips and seals them. Then she strokes her nostrils. At the touch of her fingers Tessa has the impression that she is losing her sense of smell; a moment ago, that the girl touching her smelled like her daughter, Miriam. Is it possible to recreate the smell of a person's skin? Miriam works at Indigo Scents. She is the assistant to a fragrance creator. Since the time Miriam began working in Milan, then in Geneva, Tessa has always thought that Indigo's perfumes had in them something of her daughter's smell. Indigo's most recent fragrance is called "Iceland." Now Miriam wears it too, she uses it to cover up her natural smell, which she doesn't like. Tessa has never been to Iceland. Now, thanks to Miriam, she has received an assignment from Indigo, to film a documentary there. Like many companies, Indigo too has a foundation. Before going to Iceland, Tessa envisions each day what she imagines such places to be like.

She is to leave on June 20, the beginning of summer, when the roads in the interior of Iceland are reopened. There are ten more days to go. Tessa slowly returns to consciousness within her body. The girl has finished sprinkling her muscles with cinnamon oil. She covers Tessa's body with a fluffy towel, then, under the towel, grasps the sole of Tessa's left foot and the palm of her right hand, then vice versa. She completes a set, then lets go of the body in front of her. Oil and salt

merge in Tessa's mind, salt and ice. When her time is up, Tessa gets up, wipes the excess oil from her thin body with the towel, puts her tracksuit back on. She leaves the massage room. It's almost closing time at the gym. Tessa came on foot. Her motorbike is at the mechanic's, where it will remain until she returns from Iceland. She'll take a taxi to the airport. She goes home, fixes herself a soy burger and a glass of milk.

Tessa's trip to Iceland is for initial location scouting, by herself; when she goes back with the crew, she'll know what to film. As she drinks her milk, she turns on the radio. Miriam's boyfriend, E., works for a private radio station. Since Miriam has been gone, his voice, the radio, have been a constant presence for Tessa. Sometimes the sound is slightly distorted, the voice comes to her through rustling static, some syllables are lost. She agreed to have the radio station follow her in Iceland. And she will bring her webcam with her. Once a month, Tessa broadcasts herself on the Internet. The webcam is a project that has been going on for some time. The idea is to capture the same month in her life, over several years, then compose a single work and present it to the viewer, *if beauty lies in his eye*, Tessa thinks. *A work about the pace of change, about slow change. A slow buildup as it occurs. Unhurriedly. It is not programmed but it is planned. A slow, imperceptible process, in which anyone expecting change might be driven to distraction, yet change occurs, like in hypnotic music. An Indian chant, a singsong, the voice finally merging with the instrument, the rustling of leaves, a very light breeze. Water that purifies or corrodes.* When the work is completed, five years from now, she will give it to Miriam. She can sell it to someone, maybe the Indigo Foundation. *It will require a curator, an installation, gardens. Surveillance. Day and night, even just one person, the curator, will watch the installation, will see what is happening to her today.* The webcam will be her notebook, her diary-gift to Miriam.

On the table are tangerines that have been there, untouched, since the final days of winter. She peels them, smells the sweet, tart scent, the sharp, bittersweet taste beneath her tongue. The tangerine is a whole, perfect globe, its color golden; Tessa imagines an entire slow, hot summer—complete with insects, like the summers when she was a teenager—to carry with her to the ice. If it were summer, ice would be something to eat. Tessa puts the tangerine rinds in a small cotton

pouch and hangs it around her neck. A golden talisman. If the smell of almonds can allay pain, perhaps the tangerine could temper the whiteness, soften the light. On the table there is also a cardboard box sealed with black tape. It's from Miriam. It contains her lucid dream machine, a small Nova Dreamer. A blue mask with internal sensors, two LEDs and a button at eyebrow level, ear plugs, a control box with a microprocessor. Miriam bought it in the US when it was still allowed to be sold. *For the plane trip*, the note says. Tessa slips the box into her carry-on bag. Her bag holds clothes, two video cameras—a Sony PD 170P and a Canon XM2 for emergency backup—a laptop, the webcam. She calls a taxi for the following morning. She sets the alarm. During the night, Miriam leaves her a message: *I read the tea leaves. Everything will be just fine. Have a safe trip.* Tessa is forty-five years old. When she had Miriam, she was sixteen. She remembers dreaming constantly when she was pregnant of being immersed in seawater in which fragments of icebergs appeared, even though the water was warm, tropical. She remembers dancing, in that water, with a lightness she had never felt; her body had never been mobile, flexible. Miriam had indeed been a dancer, though she no longer is one today. She had been in a car accident; she had injured a knee and had to stop dancing. Then she joined Indigo. Earlier, Miriam had worked in several water-related shows, at the Genoa Aquarium and the one in Milan; in one show, Tessa recalls, the dancers, secured with ropes, climbed up and leaped off a metal structure; in another the spectators themselves, accompanied by members of the cast, sculpted ice blocks, until a thick fog enveloped them and the dancers, clad in white robes, suddenly appeared to lead them to safety. The recollection of that long-ago tropical water is distilled, today, in the tangerine and in the ice. In the tangerine rinds that Tessa is wearing around her neck and in the ice toward which she is now heading. Before leaving the house, Tessa checks the answering machine; she leaves a message for Miriam, in Geneva. She calls E., but his cell phone is turned off. He must be broadcasting. She'll try again from the airport; they have specific, agreed-upon times at which to reach each other.

As a child, Miriam always collected small stones, shards, bones whenever she found them. Tessa had to empty her pockets by force. *The earth will always be there under your feet*, Tessa told her softly, hugging her. When she was thirteen, Miriam ran away from home with

another little girl, aged seven. They took a train bound for Geneva. In Miriam's last e-mail, now that she had moved to Geneva, there was mention of that episode (about which they no longer spoke). The times she's been to Miriam's home—various houses in various years—Tessa has always found items identical to her own, as if exchanged between the two lives: a T-shirt, an olive-wood bowl in the kitchen, a pair of boots. They have almost the same body. Tessa always carries with her a photograph of her daughter as a teenager, taken a few days before she ran away, with her short hair gathered under a leather aviator cap, her lips pink with strawberry lip gloss. It had been she, Tessa, who made Miriam wear the cap, she who tightened the strap under her chin. In all of her documentaries, there is always a moment when Tessa seeks out a child of this same age, framing her among the people around her, or who happen to be passing by: a later incarnation of Miriam, of that perfect beauty. Or of that lost telepathy between them, since Miriam is the last to speak her secret language, to emulate her ways. It is since Miriam ran away that Tessa has had the recurrent dream about the astronomical observatory. In the dream Tessa is a teenage girl, but she no longer knows if the girl is herself, or Miriam. The observatory is an isolated building, on the outskirts of the city; it opens at sunset and stays open through the night. There is no custodian, anyone can enter. The girl who is Tessa, or her daughter, goes there almost every night: it's a mystery, or a form of therapy. In the observatory's garden there are bears and wolves. You can talk to them, pet them, but you cannot remember their words, like in a fairy tale, or under hypnosis. The girl who is Tessa has yellow eyes, the color of gold, the golden fur of a wolf.

Before leaving, Tessa has purchased appropriate clothing. One of these items, a water-repellent, zippered black vest, made of Polartec, reminds her of the poem "Descent" by Ted Hughes:

You had to strip off Germany
The crisp shirt with its crossed lightnings
And go underground.
You were forced to strip off Israel
The bodice woven of the hairs of the cactus
to be bullet-proof, and go deeper.
You had to strip off Russia
With those ear-rings worn in honour

Of Eugene Onegin. And go deeper.
You had to strip off British Columbia
And the fish-skin mock-up waterproof
From the cannery, with its erotic motif
of porcupine quills, that pierced you
And came with you, working deeper
As you moved deeper.
Finally you had to strip off England
With your wedding rings
And go deeper.

Naked, her clothes strewn around her, Tessa has only two silver rings on her fingers. One of them has a snake design, it was a gift from Miriam for her fortieth birthday. The other is the reproduction of a medieval ring that Miriam bought in Rome, in a shop on Via del Moro that sells candles and sundials. The ring is thin, a simple silver circle with a hole in the middle that makes it a sundial: it can be used to measure the sun and the hour. Since Miriam gave it to her, at least ten years ago, Tessa has never taken it off. Now she must slip both of them off and conceal them in the cloth pouch she has around her neck, the one with the tangerine rinds in it; otherwise the silver might tarnish in the thermal spring waters, or, Tessa thinks, freeze on her skin. All the other items of clothing that Tessa has lined up for the trip are made of isothermal, ever-dry fabric. As soon as she puts on the Polartec, Tessa is surprised by how it feels in contact with the skin. Every night, since her mate has been gone, Tessa massages her arms, thighs, the soles of her feet, her abdomen, before going to sleep. She wants her body to remember the sensation of being touched. She knows that's the reason she goes to the masseuse. Why she goes to the gym. She wants to remain aware of her body. She hasn't heard from Mats for three weeks. She stops thinking about him. She tries on the rest of the clothes: isothermal long johns under a pair of leggings made of breathable polyester, blister-prevention socks, ankle-high hiking boots. Gloves, for touching the ice. She examines herself in the mirror. The fitting is done. In the taxi, Tessa looks out the window; her face reflected in the glass intercepts other images.

From the window of the Flybus shuttle that carries passengers to the city from Keflavík International Airport, Tessa glimpses an expanse of moss-covered black lava, and the sea. At intervals along the road,

service stations sell pastries, cigarettes, and coffee. Crossing the island, after having visited Geysir, it seems to Tessa that she can detect on her hair, on her body, in her mouth, the constant smell of sulfur that permeates her clothes as well. The geyser is a living eye of water that bulges. Day after day, every day, Tessa has the ever-stronger sensation of possessing what seem like new powers, not yet fully developed, an awareness that her body is changing: it is leaner, more solid and impenetrable, it perceives danger differently. At night she dreams constantly about a building made entirely of ice, a hotel of ice and fur: with vapors rising up from the ground, and the sensation, as she sleeps, of being adrift on water, of witnessing the reconversion of liquid states, from ice, to steam, to water. In the building are underground cisterns, stairways made of ice, huge pipes that carry water, oceans of water. Each night Tessa puts on Miriam's LDM mask, and repeats in a chant *ice calls ice, Iceland, Siberia, Antarctica. Antarctica*. With eyes open under the mask, Tessa dreams about glaciers that are slowly melting: she knows that to interpret ice drilled with deep boreholes is to interpret codes of weather and climate, that there are those who read the same secret languages in tree rings. *Maybe rings even form inside my flesh, in my legs, my arms*, Tessa thinks, *one each year*. Trees and ice are archives, icebergs break off from Jason Peninsula, from Larsen B ice shelf—they are revealed by satellites. Tessa knows that there are mysterious lakes beneath the ice of Antarctica, buried more than two miles deep, with ancient animals in them. Tigers, perhaps, saber-toothed. There, she's waking up, the dream fades. She closes her eyes, reopens them very slowly. From between half-closed eyelids Tessa can just make out the figure of a man, tall, with dark, mercurial skin, standing in perfect silence. A warrior who leads her in the hunt. A judge who sleeps in the temple, to pronounce a just sentence. She focuses, asks for a word, a premonition. The visitor vanishes. She's alone. She has the radio. The webcam. *E., can you hear me? I'm here. I'm listening to you. Can you see me? Tell me about Iceland.* Tessa has been in Iceland for ten days when the stalker shows up.

It must be a man. At first it is only an impression, in the dining room of one of the Hotel Eddas or Fosshotels, a figure who disappears in a flash of bright orange coveralls. Not a color that makes you inconspicuous. A color that makes a person abruptly turn around. Is anyone actually there? In the days that follow, it does not appear

that the stalker—it is Tessa who thinks of him with the word stalker; maybe he's just a thief, but here, Tessa can see, trust is the rule—is trying to hide. Tessa recalls that flash of orange: rather, she thinks, *It seems that, whoever he is, he's invisible to my eyes.* Except for the color, the visible trace, which lingers. The only paved road in Iceland is Route 1, the Ring Road, the loop that circles the entire island. At the exposed points along the road, where you can get caught in a blizzard in winter, there are small, red shelters, mountain huts, or cabins on the shores of the ocean-sea. Tessa has rented an all-terrain vehicle to see the interior. The Icelandic guide is named Arni and he is twenty years old. Tessa looks at the uninhabited land, those mysterious hot springs everywhere, the unexpected crop of tiny plants, with pink flowers. She wants to rent a sled with dogs. Arni, who is also a musher, knows where to get one, on the Langjökull glacier. Although Tessa has always been afraid of dogs, she is fascinated by the familiarity with which the guide sinks his hands into their thick, glossy fur, ice-white or black-white. They are sled dogs from Greenland, less than a year old, who aren't as fast as the huskies but never stop running. Each dog consumes two pounds of meat one day, the following day two pounds of dry food. Before being taken on the ice, Tessa smears a protective glop on her face, a fatty white lead paste. Besides dogs, they have glacier jeeps on Langjökull.

That night, after the dogs, Tessa falls asleep. When she wakes up, she has a fever. She vomits. Rinses her mouth out with mineral water. She has some aspirin with her, she bundles herself up tightly in the blankets to sweat it out. They might find me here in five thousand years, she thinks, like the mummified Iceman from the Hauslabjoch. With his outer coat of woven grass, an arrowhead embedded in his back, tattoos on his skin, and birch-bark containers. Precious DNA. Since she's known about the stalker—there really is someone following them; Arni too has more than once seen the figure of a man, moving behind them, in their shadows, each time they found themselves indoors, in a hotel or guesthouse; but how did that same shadow manage to follow them along the deserted roads, with no car or other off-road vehicle behind them?—Tessa feels spied upon, her smallest everyday movements watched: sleeping, eating, washing, defecating. This is a form of possession. Tessa thinks, *I don't possess anything. I bought these clothes with Indigo's money; I rented the car, the sled, the dogs, Arni's time. It's*

like a bleach bypass of these images, Tessa thinks, which makes them seem like a photograph: but they aren't photos. Looking at the dogs, images of experiments on animals come to mind: cattle mutilated in Area 51. *Nothing could be further from the physical perfection of these animals. During the night, they might be transformed into wolves. The ones who have been domesticated were descended from wolves and jackals. They will take me through icy expanses where no one can follow me.* That's what Tessa thinks, or rather: *Come on, stalker. Perch on my arm like a falcon.* She puts on the LDM mask. She points the webcam at herself. *E., can you hear me?*

Blood is the thing that stands out the most on ice. After returning from their expedition with the dogs, a man died; the news circulated the following morning in the breakfast room of the elementary school which had been converted, for the summer, into a hotel, where Tessa and Arni spent the night. They have two rooms, but throughout the school there are kids sleeping in the classrooms, in sleeping bags, on mattresses arranged among the desks. The man, a huge blonde receptionist explains to Tessa, jumped from a window, and did not survive the impact. He was not one of the hotel's guests, maybe it was an accident. Tessa did not see the body. She won't tell the girl at the reception desk that her room was broken into while she was away. Nothing is missing though. Tessa had the mask with her. She has the feeling that everything in her room has been touched and altered: that she has been set free at the end of a long trial. Arni, it seems, knew the man. He came from Reykjavík. It is with Arni that Tessa dines at a Chinese restaurant in Reykjavík before leaving. When she returns to Geneva, Miriam will make her some homemade spring rolls. On the plane, Tessa takes out her notebook, reviews her notes. The stewardess brings her a glass of milk. Tessa is alone, the seat next to her is vacant, she puts on the mask. As she sips, she sees rice paddies and gardens. She hears Mats's voice behind her, from a very great distance. *Do you hear me?* She's ready.

Translated by Anne Milano Appel

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