

rather than only going behind the curtain and pulling the lever. It seemed a profound act to say *this type* exists. It felt impersonal. It was my Harvard. Vote for me.

Since I was simply glad to have my name in the New York telephone book when I arrived why wouldn't I want my name on the ballot. But to achieve that meant ONLY gathering signatures for 18 months, which would have erased the opportunity to give speeches. And speaking was the point. So I campaigned to be a name you wrote in. Some of the pay-off was that at ages 40 and 41 I was a youthful candidate. I *could* run for president. Weirdness I've learned always pays off. It was a moment when things piled up. And another one was Iceland.

Iceland is, as you know, a country. The first thing everyone knows or doesn't know about Iceland is that it's not Greenland. Greenland is colder than Iceland though it seems like their names are reversed. If you look at Iceland's name in Icelandic it looks like Island and for the purposes of this book the unresearched fact is enough. Iceland *is* an island and I suspect its name comes from the word island not the word ice. The other thing you'll hear from anyone about Iceland is they stopped there on their way to Europe cause the tickets were cheap. Iceland is ideally situated between Europe and North America. It's kind of a pit stop place, a gas station so to speak and so it's been strategic during times of war. The US had a base there for a long time. In a moment of desperation the Prime Minister tried to sell it to Russia. Ugh.

Keflavík mostly feels like one of the least interesting places in the world, which is an American gift to be able to construct such a thing. Really if you travel here outside the interesting American cities and ignore all the natural beauty of our country you'll see that America is rapidly becoming this place which is nothing, but Iceland is not.

I went to Iceland in 1996 in many ways because of my interest in small things, including my own small presidential campaign.

There's a writer Robert Walser who was Swiss and wrote around the turn of the 20th century. For all intents and purposes he was 19th and I'd like to propose that the 19th century is the century of the working class. We were invented by Karl Marx (like he's our Santa and we're the elves) during it and also if you come from an uneducated household (and by uneducated I mean not college educated and I'd like to point out that since in our democracy the only free education is 8-12 the plan for most Americans is that they *be* "uneducated." That's the idea. Land of the free. Free to be dumb), a household that nonetheless does love art and books well then probably that family's idea of literature and your access to books will be excessively bound up with the past which if you were born in 1949 means the 19th c. was exactly as far away from you as the 21st. You had a choice. The 19th was as likely as the 21st c. It was the planet you were flying away from. Krypton to your Superboy, a place you would always associate with home. It was Charles Dickens—known to be great by educated and uneducated people alike. It was the decade of Louisa May Alcott. We all read *Little Women*. We got our female idea of being writers from Jo's attic writing studio: rats, apples, ink, and all at the time of the civil war. Jo *was* great but we have been given so little to fantasize about. And what there is is antique.

For all these reasons (i.e., sentimental attachments to the past) working class intellectuals like big words and their sentence formation is excessively ornate. It's what they think of as "smart." Pomposity. It's an embarrassing condition of being unsophisticated and not knowing what is truly smart which is simplicity and modernism; certainly it was twenty years ago when I learned to write. But the working class person is above all afraid to seem dumb so in acting "smart" and footnoting everything they betray the insecurity and weightiness of the unexperienced conclusion, which is an imitation of what writers are like. In general I think writers are

not smart. They are something else and each writer can fill in a word here, but smart is not what that word is.

The smallness of Robert Walser who began writing in 1910 is a growing phenomenon. He came to Berlin on the heels of his older brother Karl Walser who was involved in theater. Robert Walser quickly began publishing short pieces in the feuilleton, the art pages of German newspapers. Everyone cool then including Kafka and Robert Musil and Karl Kraus and invariably some women (though I don't know who they were) were in these short pages. All these people read each other and Walser might've started off with great seriousness, the seriousness of the 19th c., but quickly he aimed to be silly. (It was his only way to be modern.) A theater review of his might become a review of the audience, a certain red-faced fat woman said this and a pretentious general turned and said that. Sneezed or did something else bodily.

The 19th was still a century of horses. It's how people got around. Walser wrote little pieces that had sudden shifts in mood, that got waylaid from their original intention, that began thinking about themselves, the sentences. Or even the pencil he was writing with. These pieces would often end abruptly. During this same period he wrote a number of novels, some of which are gettable, some are lost. It's questionable to Walser's biographers whether he had a sex life, but the movement of his narrative is often obstructed or rerouted in response to a girl. (As a lesbian I identify with this but I will follow up on it elsewhere. Probably years from now in a volume of linked novellas entitled *Three Wives*.)

Finally whether in response to the city or something else Walser began to go for walks. He would go off for the weekend on long hikes and reported everything that happened during the walk in a haphazard way. Jesus might be seen down below out the window of a guesthouse standing under a streetlight. The largeness of his work was that Jesus could be an incidental character, could be minor. A

napkin could be gigantic and on the corner of one could be a novel and down on the wet coffee-stained bottom was a play. Then maybe a poem or two. What's exciting about his work (besides how good it is) is how permeable its borders are in terms of scale. I think he had a hard time making money so he began to live in tinier and tinier rooms and he left Berlin and returned to Switzerland and then even his handwriting grew tiny.

My interest in Robert Walser connected me to a curator, Hans Ulrich Obrist (HUO). The art world was discovering Walser in the '90s and what they called his microscripts were reproduced gigantically on the walls of a gallery and there was a walking museum in Switzerland that I think was a project of Hans Ulrich. Hans is Swiss. Most importantly Hans Ulrich was embarking on a project called Do It. It was a neo-fluxus thing. Fluxus was engaged with the notion of "concrete" art. Which was about how some mid 20th century composers used electronic media in composition: a recording of rain becomes a piece in itself or an element of it. The idea was later expanded by Allan Kaprow to mean "happenings"—multi-media productions that relied on the live connections between one media and the next to make meaning. Media could be performers, bodies, words as well as excitable '60s analogue technology. To Kaprow "concrete" referred most specifically to the elaborately improvised and poetic nature of all these connections. It has as its intellectual basis a trembling belief in the communal value of the situations the choices get made in. That's really where it's at. In 21st century terms we'd say it's about their inbetweenness.

So Hans calls. He says that the first Do It show will be at the Kjarvalsstaðir Museum in Reykjavik. His voice was so fast and scratchy on the phone. On my answering machine. Some already antique mid-nineties technology. Will it be cold? It was in March. No it was going to be about ten degrees colder than here (the east coast of America which is New York). It was like a very grey spring.

I once met the artist Jim Dine and he told me something very useful, which I've thought about though mostly ignored. Only go to places where you're invited. He meant countries. I have some travel stories that fortify the wisdom of his thought but Iceland was the one that shows its truth. Looking around in Iceland I thought: I am on a junket. I felt *extremely* invited: as poet, art writer, a dyke, and especially a former presidential candidate. What Hans had in mind when he called me is none of my business.

Do It was a set of instructions solicited from a group of contemporary artists (including myself) for works to be assembled or fulfilled by other local artists so that in each subsequent installation around the world the show would change. I never knew if there were other Do Its after Reykjavik but during this one HUO proclaimed Iceland to be the most 21st c. country in the world. That was enough. It wasn't Europe and it wasn't North America. Was it Atlantis?

Hans was kind of young and made being a curator look like a spiritual vocation. He had one shirt, a dark striped one, and he wore a suit jacket and spoke very fast mostly about rhizomatic issues. He eventually published a small orange book about the entire Do It project (in which I explain how to run for president of the United States) but right now there was just this show.

I remember riding happily from the airport and seeing grey and gold, the predominant colors of this country. I thought of some fiction by Büchner, a story called *Lenz*. Iceland was mountainous, and its sky was a gloomy pearl.

Have you been here before, Eileen, asked the museum's red-headed curator. His name was Gunnar. I had not. I had a tiny hotel room in Reykjavik that in later trips I've not been able to place. On a junket you can entirely lack a map to pin your experiences on. A van picked us up in the morning and swiftly we moved through the close streets, which opened at the low brown modern museum we were presenting in. Iceland was a dream country. And I've returned

to the museum since then but that time it sat in the middle of an empty plain on a stony island in the middle of nowhere. I loved the setting. The not knowing what would happen next. The literal event, the opening, was quickly gotten over with. There was a jetlag day and then there was the opening. I'm not an artist so I never had one before. I recall the handsome wooden realization of one piece. Icelanders totally know how to make a big box. It was just (the instruction mode makes you inclined to say "just" about everything. Though unlike modernism in which fools will say a child could do it, in postmodernism it's generally a question of *which* child: i.e., fame) a big bin containing native produce. And there were apples in this bin though I don't think now that apples grow in Iceland. Maybe it was a joke. Icelanders *are* big jokers. Of course! It was a bin of imported fruit. At first I thought everyone I met here was kidding. Though I have to admit I think that everywhere. It's a way to understand reality. Hah.

The people at the opening at some point in time had all lived a few blocks from me in the East Village. We talked about how the neighborhood was changing. Steina Vasulka now lived in New Mexico with her husband, Woody. Steina is this seminal video artist of the Nam June Paik moment whose work was these elemental panels of fire and water.

Lava too which is Iceland's version of molding clay. Lava is everywhere here. Like an ominous clock that has stopped. Iceland's dark grey sweater is everywhere covered with bright green lichen. These landscapes folding all over the country (I almost said planet) say what's churning underground, what's running things. Unsteadiness is the country's deepest force. It's the youngest country in the world, errrk, pulling apart. Iceland's getting larger. Turn the faucet and a rotten egg smell gushes out. It's proof. A city of hotels where the water is always too hot. In the days that followed we saw waterfalls and geysers. Maybe Iceland is a more efficient America. Rather than

having Hawaii *and* Yellowstone *and* New Mexico, Iceland has compacted it all into one island. Glaciers too. America *has* glaciers right.

Steina talked about her years of working at The Kitchen which she co-founded and how awful nonprofits are. I know, I said, shaking my head. It's like having the same horrible ex. I remembered the weird name on the Kitchen's mailings next to the indicia: Haleakala Inc. I thought that was Hawaiian I cried, hitting my head. Steina grinned.

The Icelandic artists at the opening had lived in LA. They went to CalArts. They had lived in Paris. They spoke French, German, Danish, Norwegian, and English. Not in that *European* way that implied you were an American idiot for only knowing one language. We were in their country, Iceland, which is above all not an irritated place. No one was mad you didn't speak Icelandic. That was it. Iceland was forgiving. All languages were other languages here.

There was a panel the next day or some other day and though it was easy at the opening to say I'm part of the show, after the panel I actually met my first Icelandic writer, Kristin Omarsdottir and in the ten years since we've become friends. I feel that we are really good friends but Kristin's hard to stay in touch with and then a very chummy e-mail comes sailing onto my computer like we spoke yesterday. What I am most proud of claiming is that she is a female writer I increasingly understand over the years. You know how you can't just meet someone in their country a few nights and then your country.

You have to repeat the experience a number of ways, to begin to compare the person to people you know, to have that *aha*, and then realize that that impression is also wrong. Slowly the new friend begins to appear in your imagination like a kind of geological event you've never encountered before. That's pretty much how I experience Kristin by now. She's very funny which is hard to get in translation though I always felt her timing.