

Ilulissat

By the time of these reflections we had travelled north to Ilulissat, Greenland's third largest town with a population approximating five thousand. The enormous glacier Sermeq Kujalleq lies about fifty kilometres east of Ilulissat; it is the most productive of all glaciers in the Northern Hemisphere calving eighty-six million tons of ice on a daily basis. Its icebergs fill Ilulissat fjord and float into the Disko Bay area where the ancient inland ice make a last display of exhilarating shapes and colours before it melts away. The melt-water causes upwelling of nutrient-rich bottom water, and thus the Disko Bay is home to a multitude of marine animals as well as air- and land based life forms that feed on them. Remains of settlements in Ilulissat dating as far back as the Saqqaq people (c. 2400 BC) indicate the abundance of food that for millennia have sustained human life despite the harsh winter climate.

We had spent a day on the island of Qeqertarsuaq, and we were on our way back after a day of extraordinary beauty. We sailed through an expanse of shimmering motion, to all sides icebergs glistened in shades of blue and white. The midnight sun lit our eyes to an immense landscape, our vision was strangely transparent now and all the impressions seemed to go right through our eyes and out into space. Days without nights made time come unstuck and I felt slightly tipsy from the rocking of the boat. I had a word in my mind. Teeming. I thought of my friends and wished they could be here to see this. Every living human should have the chance to see this. THIS. And I knew that words and photographs would never convey the moment, words always fail when it comes to the now. They are like a small shield inserted between the now and the perceiver filtering out THIS and its meaning now. I sat down and closed my eyes for a moment, trying to find a quiet space to fasten all these impressions. Our words need silence to have depth.

Maybe this is why we often feel uncomfortable when there is silence between us, especially with people whom we don't know so well. In the silence the words ring all the louder. They reveal. In the constant chatter they seem less important or to carry less meaning. It is feasible to say that society began when our ancestors first reinterpreted guttural grunts and formed sounds to express their intentions. As language emerged, the conveyance of information became easier, perhaps more uncomplicated, and we expect that human society developed as a result. So says the holy scriptures, 'In the beginning was the word'. Our thoughts and, importantly, our structures of thought, are translated into words. Words make us laugh, give directions, reprimand, ask forgiveness, make theories and encourage, they take each one of us to shared areas in our collective consciousness and connect our minds to create understanding. So powerful are words that we often mistake them for reality. I experience this when I wander into an argument with my sister and unknowingly upset her (not to say that I don't also upset her knowingly). 'Why are you so this or that?' Why am 'I' so what? Who is 'this' and what is 'that'? Sometimes we get lost in translation and hurt each other, even when we think we are being careful. Words are powerful exactly because we forget that they are just symbols: they become reality. You are either with us or against us.

The constant chatter is not always innocent. It can be deafening and blunt our perception. Not always so severely as to make the repeated lie a truth, but enough that we become disinterested in reality. In Ilulissat we stayed in a hostel and made acquaintances with several other lodgers. One such friend was a retired workman from Denmark who had worked in Greenland for a number of years in his youth. Now he had come back on a holiday with his wife to see again some of the places he had once lived. He had a wealth of stories and anecdotes about his working days which he invariably shared with us. When my sister remarked how she could do with a shower he replied with a comment about 'the dirty Inuit' and how they could go for weeks without washing. 'That's the way they are', and he went on to other stories in the shallow

waters of chatter. Here he was, in one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen, and everywhere he looked he saw this landscape through the filter of his old pictures. I wonder if it was his stories, and not the country itself, that he really enjoyed about this holiday. In the noise of words we easily forget to look and see where we are.

This is all fine if that was what he had travelled to Greenland for. But he misses something substantial by ignoring (albeit unintentionally) the importance of words and stories. He overlooks that quality which is only found in meeting the world without preconceived ideas, he misses the opportunity of directly experiencing the world as it is. Of belonging to all of it. No doubt his pictures were shaped by real experience in his youth, but now they were only stories that served to uphold his idea of himself and his place in the world. This points to something deeper about human perception: everywhere humans look they see more what they expect to see than what really is. This cliché is on the verge of being overworked and might not do its job (hence the talk of pictures of pictures) but it reveals a fundamental observation which we must keep in mind everywhere we look. We must not mistake symbols, whether verbal, written or physical, with reality. If we do, we miss out on the unspoken and inexplicable instances in life that carry beauty *in themselves*, instances we might find to be the rule, not the exception.

So, we turn our attention to the difference between 'picture' and 'picture of a picture'. We navigate the different roles we play in our lives by the use of pictures containing some information (reflections) so our environment can 'see us'. These pictures are co-created by ourselves and our surroundings and they are therefore dynamic and flexible. Pictures are indispensable to the smooth functioning of our lives and we have great fun playing with them, twisting them, and subverting them. They exist collectively and they dish out roles for us to meet, they determine the patterns of behaviour that we are actively living. Pictures of pictures, on the other hand, are static and oppressive concepts about the world which defy reality in their insistence on permanence. Dead pictures. We often acquire them second-hand and project them onto our environment. Pictures of pictures are dead thoughts from the past we carry to the present, and they range from ideas about some 'terrorist threat' in our lives to 'who said this' in that argument. They therefore often go unnoticed and we mistake them for mere pictures. They too exist collectively and shape our lives, but when we subvert them it is not just a game, it can be dead serious.

Being Danish in Greenland produces immediate pictures that shape who I am here and gives me different roles in certain situations. These are the pictures of the continuing story of Denmark-Greenland and we must take them seriously, understand them and turn them inside out to see what they reflect about the present. The trouble comes when we confuse our pictures with ourselves and ignore our observation that pictures reflect relationship, they exist between us in our relations, not inside us in some unknowable realm. So humans are not 'aggressive', 'lazy' or 'sinful' by nature but *in their relationships*. And such characteristics are co-created, reinforced or broken in collectivity. We easily confound pictures with self and believe they are inherent to our constitution. With words we adopt pictures (of pictures) and give them room in our lives, we make them real, or at least try to. This might be an important observation because it allows us to be creative in our relationships, and while we take them seriously we can actively change the dead pictures back into flexible pictures. We can begin to narrate our own stories about our lives. It is only a small difference in attitude but, as we have seen, even a slight change in perspective makes a world of difference.

I opened my eyes again to the strange scenery in the Disko Bay. People had gathered on the deck to watch the entering to Ilulissat harbour. The melting brash ice created ripples in the water reflecting the warm sunlight. In the morning the sea had been dark like liquid lead, sombre, almost frightening. The contrast was

astonishing and I wondered what this seascape would look like when it was angry. Now the water was quiet and its beauty was mirrored in the faces of the passengers, they seemed at home in this moment. THIS wasn't 'strange', 'sombre' or 'astonishing', it just was and it made us smile.