

Cities on the Edge, Cities of Enchantment: Invisible Cities in the Far North

Abstract

Calvino's *Invisible Cities* tells a multitude of stories of invisible, unreal, utopian and anti-utopian cities and explores 'the hidden reasons which bring men to live in cities: reasons which remain valid over and above any crisis'. Our contribution takes up some of the themes that Calvino places at the heart of his poetic meditation on city life. This includes his praise of magical enchantment; the desire for human company that pervades his meditations on the desert traveller's – the solitary individual's – view of the city; and the fundamental role of the human action that is most central to Calvino's book, namely, storytelling itself. To pursue these themes, we take the reader on a journey to some of the northernmost inhabited parts of Iceland, where habitation itself is crumbling.

Keywords

Italo Calvino • Iceland • Westfjords • landscape • folklore • elves

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Introduction

Invisible Cities is not a book about cities as such. It is a book about storytelling about cities. Italo Calvino already makes this clear in his first sentence. *Invisible Cities* tells a tale about how Marco Polo travels to the eastern end of the world he knows. Here, he is made welcome at the court of Kublai Khan, Emperor of the Tartars. Kublai Khan takes great delight in stories of invisible, unreal, utopian and, towards the end of the book, dystopian cities that the Venetian traveller claims to have encountered. However, Calvino's book starts by stating: '*Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions*' (Calvino 1974, p. 5; emphasis original). It is stories that enthrall the great khan, not realities; and these stories do not even need to be believed. Through these stories, Calvino's text explores – as Calvino himself put it in a lecture held in 1984 – 'the hidden reasons which bring men to live in cities: reasons which remain valid over and above any crisis' (Calvino 1983, p. 41).

In the mid-twentieth century, when Martin Heidegger developed his classic theory of dwelling, he put his focus firmly on building. For Heidegger, dwelling in its essence was virtually identical to building (Heidegger 1993). With a novelist's eye for the importance of mental concepts, Calvino's focus on storytelling was considerably more progressive. His writing anticipated the foundational insights that, in a more academic context, Yi-Fu Tuan was to formulate soon afterwards in his project of a 'humanist geography'. While not focusing on storytelling as such, Tuan already realized the crucial importance of stories for constructing a sense of place (Tuan 1977, p. 4; Tuan 1991, pp. 102–103; see also de Certeau 1984, pp. 91–110). More recent trends in scholarship, such as Bertrand Westphal's geocriticism, have followed this road further (Westphal 2011; Tally 2013; Ryan et al. 2016; eds Egeler & Gropper 2020).

In thinking about storytelling and its importance for dwelling and place, Calvino's work was not only forward-looking in its day. Even half a century after *Le città invisibili* was first published in

1972, it still speaks to us, telling us crucial aspects of storytelling about place. For us, this enduring reach of Calvino's work manifests itself in a particularly poignant way. It throws a spotlight on a region currently experiencing a population loss bordering on demographic collapse. In our contribution, we have taken our starting point from the idea that dominates the very title of Calvino's poetic meditation on city life, that is, the invisibility of its governing forces. Approaching our material through the lens of storytelling, we explore the theme of magical enchantment that runs through so many of Calvino's vignettes of *Invisible Cities*. We have also focused on the desire for human company that pervades his meditations on the desert traveller's – the solitary individual's – view of the city. To pursue these themes, we will go north and to the very edge of the idea of the city, journeying to some of the northernmost inhabited parts of Iceland. There, habitation itself is crumbling, and human settlement is so sparse that the idea of the city collapses. Yet this very collapse means that human dwelling is stripped down to its essentials, making the needs and desires that support and underlie human dwelling stand out with exceptional clarity.

Enchantment and the city

The first city described in the *Invisible Cities* is Diomira. Among its proudest sights are its 'bronze statues of all the gods' (Calvino 1974, p. 7). In the city of Tamara, there are temples from whose doors 'the gods' statues are seen, each portrayed with his attributes – the cornucopia, the hourglass, the medusa – so that the worshipper can recognize them and address his prayers correctly' (1974, p. 13). In 'Isaura, city of the thousand wells', two forms of religion exist: one, in which the gods of the city dwell in the subterranean depths of the underground lake deep below the city; and another, in which its gods live in the buckets and pulleys that bring the water up from the subterranean reservoir to the light of the day (1974, p. 20). The city of Eutropia is sacred to the god Mercury (1974, p. 65). The city of Leandra is protected

by two types of gods: one that is connected to its houses, and one that follows the families that live in them (1974, pp. 78–79). Therefore, enchantment runs through the early chapters of *Invisible Cities* like a golden thread. Calvino's poetic imagery repeatedly revolves around themes of the supernatural, the divine and the otherworldly.

How far does this fascination with the supernatural apply? Since classical antiquity, cities have often had places of worship at their centre. Here belong the cathedrals of the Middle Ages as much as the Parthenon temple on the Acropolis of Athens. Yet how far can Calvino's focus on the otherworldly persevere if one pushes the concept of dwelling to its limits? To explore this question, let us go to the edge of the city, and then continue far beyond. Let us go to Iceland, to the district of Strandir (cf. Egeler 2024a). Strandir is a region of Iceland located in the Icelandic Westfjords. Never densely populated, it has long been undergoing a substantial population loss. Since the late 1990s, it has lost almost a third of its inhabitants (Statistics Iceland 2021). Within its present-day boundaries, Strandir now has less than 600 people living in an area of approximately 3,000 km².

The farm of Brúará is one of the more remote places in this already remote region. It is located on the northern edge of the fjord of Bjarnarfjörður, on a rocky stretch of coastline that looks out towards the Arctic Ocean. There is little flat land between the water's edge and the mountains, which steeply rise almost directly from the sea to heights between 300 and over 400 metres. The road is cut into the slopes well above Brúará, so it bypasses the farm and further increases its isolation. The combination of its lack of arable land and its isolation has always made farming at Brúará a challenge. The last farmers had given up and abandoned the farm by 1950. Today, two small but well-kept wooden summer houses nestle between steep-sided rock formations and the low, grassy mounds that mark the remains of the turf-built farmhouses.

Brúará was never densely settled, and it never was wealthy enough to pay for bronze statues like those dreamed of by Calvino. Yet like so many old farms in Iceland, it had, and continues to have, its share of enchantment. This is preserved and passed on through storytelling, consisting of a treasure trove of folktales about supernatural entities and occurrences in the farm landscape. A central location for these tales lies just a few metres to the northeast of the houses of Brúará. A tongue of rock around four metres high is demarcated by perpendicular rock faces. It arches around the houses in a way that almost suggests an embrace. This tongue of rock is named Höfði, meaning the 'Headland' (Fig. 1).

Memories of life at Brúará, when it was still a working farm, have been recorded in several interviews. In the mid-twentieth century, it had already been realized that the world of Strandir's old farms was disappearing, and considerable efforts were made to capture something of their way of life for posterity (Matthías Helgason n.d.; Hallfreður Örn Eiríksson 1970; Þórður Kristjánsson 1974). In these testimonies, Höfði plays a prominent role because Höfði was thought to be a place inhabited by the *álfar* or 'elves'. Höfði was not the only elf dwelling in Brúará. Stapi, the 'Rock Tower', was a second elf dwelling. This is a striking coastal rock formation with perpendicular sides and a rock gate that is located right on the shoreline, a mere twenty-minute walk from the farm (Fig. 2). Today, every human house in Brúará is matched by an elf rock, and each of these elf rocks is around the same size as the human houses.

Traditional Icelandic elves are not the small, cute saccharine entities known from Peter Pan, Disney movies and tourist brochures produced in the big city of Reykjavík (Erla Stefánsdóttir 1993, 2011). Rather, the *huldufólk* or 'hidden people' of the Icelandic countryside are a parallel society of otherworldly farmers. On the



Figure 1. The former farm of Brúará in the Strandir district of Iceland. Today, only two summer houses remain at Brúará. The tongue of rock to the left of the houses, almost exactly in the centre of the photograph, is Höfði, that is, the 'Headland', which is a central location for storytelling on the farm
Photo by M. Egeler



Figure 2. Stapi, the 'Rock Tower', the second elf dwelling of Brúará
Photo by M. Egeler

rare occasions that humans see them, they are much like human beings in size, appearance and longings, just a bit better off than their human neighbours and living in rocks near the farmhouses (cf. Ármann Jakobsson 2015; Ásdís Aðalbjörg Arnalds et al. 2008; Gunnell 2018, 2020; Egeler 2024b, 2024a, pp. 51–54). They even follow the same religion as the human society they live alongside, since they are often said to be Christian (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 2003, pp. 171–183; Ólína Þorvarðardóttir 1995, pp. 10–15; see further Gunnell 2007, 2017). At Stapi, sometimes lights and unknown people in blue clothes have been seen (Þórður Kristjánsson 1974, p. 3). The hidden people are people in the first instance. They just happen to be people surrounded by a more-than-human splendour who can afford expensive dyes for their clothing.

Although farming was given up in Brúará in 1950, life continues – or rather, it has restarted. After a long period of abandonment, in 2003, Brúará was bought by Lárus Jóhannsson. Lárus is a welcoming, lively man in his late sixties. When Brúará came up for sale some twenty years ago, this gave Lárus the chance to fulfil his life-long dream of a place of his own in the countryside. For him, the northern parts of Strandir were love at first sight. At that time, there were no houses in Brúará. Abandoned in 1950, the old farmhouse had been demolished in the 1970s. The two wooden houses there now were built by Lárus with his own hands. As he puts it, building and renovating



Figure 3. The forbidden grassy slope at the foot of Höfði between the lawn and the cliff face
Photo by M. Egeler

are 'his yoga'. In parallel with rebuilding at Brúará, he also delved into whatever he could find about his new farm in local traditions, publications and archives, and compiled a history of Brúará and its stories since the 1600s.

One of the lessons emphasized by these traditions is that one should leave the elves in the local rocks well alone. At the foot of Höfði, there is a little grassy slope that forms the transition between the hay meadow of the farm and the cliff face of Höfði (Fig. 3). Virtually every testimony about Brúará mentions this grassy slope, for it was an *álagablettur* or 'place of enchantments'. It belonged to the elves in Höfði and was not to be touched by humans. When Brúará was still a working farm and the home of a young family, the children were not allowed to play there (Hallfreður Öm Eiríksson 1970). One was not allowed to cut its grass or turf. Even the horses stayed well away (Hallfreður Öm Eiríksson 1970). When Lárus bought the farm, as part of the handover of the property, its last owners made a point of warning him against violating this particular place.

Yet not everybody believed the old stories. A number of tales explain what happened when the injunctions were ignored (Hallfreður Öm Eiríksson 1970; Þórður Kristjánsson 1974, pp. 1–2). Lárus still tells the traditional stories (Dagrun Ósk Jónsdóttir 2021):

Og það eru til sögur um það að ... Ég held að það hafi verið síðustu ábúendurnir, þeir voru að endurnýja fjárhúsin sem eru hérna fyrir neðan, tóftirnar eru hérna fyrir neðan höfðann og þeir tóku torf úr brekkunum hérna undir höfðanum eða sem sagt tóku ekkert mark á þessu álagadæmi. Og svo þegar að búið var að ganga frá og klára, að refta þökin og torfleggja, leggja torf á það, allt fullsmíðað, þá tóku menn til hvílu að kvöldi og svo þegar þeir vakna um morguninn þá var allt hrúnið. [...] Og það náttúrulega, renna á menn tvær grímur. Þannig að þeir ákváðu það að bæta fyrir brot sín og tóku allar þökurnar og torfið og skiluðu því aftur í brekkuna.

There are stories about.... I think that it was the last farmers, they were renewing the sheep fold that is below here. Its ruins are below the Höfði. They took the turf from the slope here under the Höfði, they didn't think about this curse. And then, when they had finished, laid the turf and built the whole fold, they went to sleep in the evening. When they woke up the next morning everything had collapsed [...] and, naturally, they were surprised. So, they decided to try to make amends and took all the turf and returned it to the slope.

Another story says:

Önnur sagan var sú að sá sem bjó hérna á þeim tíma, hann ákvað að slá brekkuna. Þetta er náttúrulega mjög fínt gras þarna í brekkunni. Og jújú, svo fer hann að sofa að kvöldi. Það var náttúrulega róð hérna líka á bátum, til fiskjar og báturinn var hérna í lendingunni hérna fyrir neðan. Svo þegar hann kemur út um morguninn þá er báturinn horfinn. Eftir að hann sló brekkuna. Hann fer að leita. Og hann finnur hann hérna í næstu vík fyrir innan. [...] Og það fannst engin skýring á þessu önnur en sú að þarna væri verið að refsa honum fyrir að hafa slegið brekkuna sko. Og gefa honum svona, já, aðvörun [hlær]. Þetta borgaði sig ekki.

Another story was that the man who lived here at the time decided to cut the grass on the slope. Naturally, there is very fine grass on the slope. And yes, he then went to sleep in the evening. At the time, they also went out there on rowing boats to fish, and the boat was here at the farm's moorage, right here below. So, when he went out the next morning the boat had disappeared. After he cut the grass from the hill. So, he went searching, and found it in the next bay [...]. The boat was right there, but there was no explanation on how it got there, other than that the man was being punished for cutting the grass from the slope, and that this was a warning [laughs]. That this would not pay off.

An outbuilding that had been roofed with turf sods from the enchanted place collapsed overnight. When the grass was cut there, the farmer was warned off by the inexplicable disappearance of his boat. One wonders what stories would have been told if the respective culprits had not relented and henceforth avoided any interference with the enchanted slope. At other farms in the region, local storytelling describes the alleged consequences of sustained violations of an enchanted place as being potentially disastrous. In nearby Goðdalur, in 1948 almost an entire family was killed by an avalanche after a house had allegedly been built on an enchanted place (Harmleikurinn í Goðdal 1949; Rósmundur Jóhannsson 1949, p. 6). In Brúará, things did not escalate that far. Yet if the elves were that dangerous, why did people choose to believe in them, or at least tell stories that asserted such a belief? As recent research on the history of religions has shown, belief is not something unproblematic that is just a given. Rather, maintaining it requires constant – if not necessarily conscious – work, work which is largely done through telling detailed, vivid stories (Luhmann 2020; see also Röhrich 1991 & Dégh 2001 on storytelling, legends and belief). So why invest this work into something threatening and potentially dangerous? Again, Calvino's meditation on the nature of the city may suggest an answer.

Solitude and the city

The second city described in the *Invisible Cities* is named Isidora. Marco Polo's tale about Isidora starts with the following sentences (Calvino 1974, p. 8):

When a man rides a long time through wild regions he feels the desire for a city. Finally he comes to Isidora, a city where the buildings have spiral staircases encrusted with spiral seashells, where perfect telescopes and violins are made, where the foreigner hesitating between two women always encounters a third, where cockfights degenerate into bloody brawls among the bettors. He was thinking of all these things when he desired a city.

After traversing wild, uninhabited regions, the traveller begins to develop a desire for human buildings and human company. Marco Polo's narration includes an oscillation between erotic

daydreams and imaginary violence. Both are exciting, and both break the solitude of the lonely traveller. Both are also mirrored by the stories of Brúará. The inhabitants of the city of Isidora threaten violence no more than the elves of Höfði: while the ones start bloody brawls, the others smashed the newly-constructed building that had been roofed with the turf from their inviolate slope. And just as the city of Isidora has its erotic allure, the elves also may be forward like the women of Marco Polo's fantasy city. One of Lárús's stories addresses this theme of erotic entanglement:

Og svo náttúrulega er ein kona, húsmóðir sem að bjó hérna, hún átti vinkonu í klettunum, hérna í höfðanum. [...] Það var eitthvað á þá leið að hún [huldukonan] vildi fá son hennar sem hérna mannsefni fyrir dóttur sína. [...] En konan eða húsmóðirin hún vildi það ekki og neitaði alltaf. En huldukonan tók því svo sem ekkert mjög illa þannig. En það varð náttúrulega aldrei úr. En sagan segir að þær hafi alla tíð verið vinkonur síðan.

Then naturally, there was a woman, a housewife, who lived here. She had a friend in the rocks, here in the Höfði. [...] It was something like she [the hidden woman] wanted to have the housewife's son as a husband for her daughter [...] but the housewife did not agree and always turned her down. However, the hidden woman did not take it badly, so to speak. This naturally never came to be. However, the story notes that they remained friends despite this.

In this story, the elf woman in the rock wanted to marry her elfin child to a human one. Nothing came of it, but no ill will resulted from the failed courtship either. The story presents it as just a normal thing to suggest. Indeed, within the world of Strandir folktales, it was a fairly normal thing. Love affairs between elves and humans have occurred time and again, some happy and most tragic (Sigurður Rósmundsson 1929, pp. 12–13; Jón Árnason 1954–1961, pp. 97–99; Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980, vol. 1, p. 43; see also Guðrún Bjartmarsdóttir 1988, pp. 22–23; Ólína Þorvarðardóttir 1995, pp. 14–15; and McKinnell 2005 on such relationships in earlier Norse myths and legends). Here, the erotic tension that Calvino describes as a central feature of urban dwelling is made a core part of the enchantment that is equally part of it.

The presence of the elves in the rock formations of Höfði and Stapi thus appears to answer to a human desire for human(oid) company, to break the solitude of the 'wild regions'. Remarkably, Lárús tells how he experienced the elves of his farm Brúará in exactly this way. When Lárús worked on building himself a home in Brúará, he lived fully immersed in its isolation. Around the early 2000s, he tells how he lived, cooked and slept in his car for weeks at a time while constructing his first small cabin. Even though he was the only human being in Brúará at this time, the old stories of enchantment still had their effect and he never felt alone. He constantly sensed that he was being observed and followed. Yet this sensation never was an unpleasant one. It was a sensation of being accompanied rather than stalked. As Lárús put it in his own words:

En ég var svona, mér fannst alltaf einhver vera að fylgjast með mér. Svona svipuð tilfinning og maður finnur þú veist, þú snýrð baki í einhvern og þú veist hann er að horfa á þig. Og oft á tíðum þegar ég var að labba hérna, ég snéri mér við og ... mér fannst eins og það væri bara verið að fylgjast með hvað ég væri að gera. [...] En ekkert óþæginnleg. Ekkert svoleiðis.

I always felt like someone was watching me. It is a similar feeling to when you have your back turned towards

someone, but you can still feel that they are watching you. This often occurs when I am walking around here. I would turn around and ... I just felt like I was being watched, what I was doing [...] but it wasn't uncomfortable, nothing like that.

The elves in Brúará were not scary; they were company. At worst, they were a bit playful, and – enacting common patterns of Icelandic folk storytelling – sometimes Lárús appeared to be on the receiving end of something like elfin curiosity, or an irritating habit of otherwise good neighbours to borrow things without asking:

Svo voru að hverfa verkfæri. [...] Þau voru að hverfa og koma svo bara aftur á sama stað [...] Mér þótti það svoldið magnað sko. Af því þegar maður var hérna, það er nú yfirleitt hvasst hérna, eða þú veist svona vindasamt. Maður þarf alltaf að fergja það sem maður er með þú veist, setja steina á þetta svo að það fjúki ekki eða skorða einhversstaðar. Það kom fyrir að eitthvað verkfæri sem að ég var með bara svona alltaf á sínum stað, þegar ég var að smíða, svo ætlaði ég að taka það og þá var það ekki þar lengur. Og það náttúrulega endaði með því að ég þurfti þá bara að sækja eitthvað annað verkfæri til að nota. Notaði það og var svo kannski ekkert að hugsa um hitt. Og svo fór að þurfti ég að sækja eitthvað á sama stað og þá bara er þetta bara þarna. [...] Og ég er alveg viss um það, að það hefur einhver fengið verkfæri til að skoða eða lánað.

Then tools were disappearing [...] They were disappearing and then reappearing in the same place [...]. I thought that was quite startling. Because it is often quite windy, you always have to fasten the things you are using and put stones on them so they won't blow away or stabilize them somewhere. This happened with a tool that I was using, and I always kept it in a specific place when I was building. Once when I meant to grab it, it was gone. I naturally ended up fetching a different tool. I used that and wasn't thinking about the original one anymore. And then when I had to fetch something else in the same place, it had reappeared [...] and I am certain, someone had borrowed it to examine it or to use it.

Like the last farmers of Brúará who worked the land there around 1900 and who talked about seeing lights and people in blue clothes near Stapi (Þórður Kristjánsson 1974, p. 3), Lárús even had his own experience of seeing the world of the elves. When he talks about this experience, he describes it as an experience without any trace of the uncanny:

Það er nú skritið sko og ótrúlegt, að einu sinni þegar ég var svona að klára þetta hús, þá var maður bara að vinna hérna frá morgni til kvölds eða þangað til maður fór að sofa og bara byggði og byggði og svo fór ég að hugsa bíddu hvernig ætli það líti nú út. [...] Svo var húsið alveg að verða búið, þá dettur mér í hug að labba þarna út í klettana til þess að sjá húsið svona frá þessu sjónarhorni. Þetta var að kvöldi til mig minnir að þetta hafi verið bara í júlí eitthvað svoleiðis. Það var svona bjart yfir og búið að vera sól um daginn en hún var nú farin á bak við fjöllinn. Ég sest þarna á stein og svona er að horfa hérna yfir, og höfðinn í bakgrunninum. Þá sé ég... undarlegt, sé ég tvo svona gotneska boga, ljósboga. [...] Hérna þar sem er geil hérna inn í klettinn og er annar þarna aðeins lengra. Þetta var svona ljós fjólubláir bogar. Ég bara glápti á þetta. Nú voru þetta ekki sólargeislarnir sem voru að, að spila þarna eitthvað á klettana [...] Og ég horfi á þetta, og bara, hvað er þetta? Þá finnst mér eins og ég

sjái herna í berginu, svona burstir á gömlum bæ... svona bara í fjarlægð, sá ekkert betur en það. Og ég hugsaði nú er ég eitthvað að klikka sko. Og ég horfi nokkra stund og svo hugsa ég jæja, þetta hlýtur að bara vera einhver vitleysa og ég ákveð að nú horfi ég bara eitthvað annað og svo ætla ég að sjá þetta aftur, þá var allt horfið. [...] Þetta er svona það merkilegasta sem ég hef séð. Mér þótti þetta alveg ótrúlegt. Þetta voru svona ljósfjólubláir svona eins og gotneskir bogar, svona eins og hurð. En ég sá enga hurð eða neitt, bara þessa boga. Á tveimur stöðum þar sem eru göt inn í klettinn. Ég gáði að þessu seinna, þegar ég kom til baka. Þetta er lygilegt en þetta gerðist.

It is strange and unbelievable. Once when I was finishing up this house, at that time I worked from morning until night, until I went to sleep. I just built and built. Then I thought, I wonder how this all looks. [...] When the house was almost ready, I decided to walk down to the shore to see it from a new perspective. This was in the evening, probably in July. It was bright, it had been a sunny day but now the sun was gone behind the mountains. I sat down on a rock and looked over everything, the house with the Höfði in the background. Then I see something strange. I see two gothic arcs of light [...]. Here, where there is a cavity in the rock and another one close by. They were light purple, blue arcs. I just, you know, I just stared. This wasn't the sunrays playing on the cliffs [...]. And I just watched and wondered what this was. And then I felt like I could see in the rocks gables like on an old farm, just from afar, I couldn't see any better. And I thought, now I am losing it. And I watched for a while and thought this must be a mistake, so I decided to look away. When I looked back everything was gone [...] This is the most amazing thing I have seen. I thought this was just unbelievable. It was light purple gothic arcs, like a door. Well, I didn't see a door, only the arcs. In two places where there are cavities in the rock. I checked again later when I got back. This is unbelievable, but this happened.

Another time, Lárus heard a Christian mass sung inside the rock of the elves. What is more, he was not the only one to hear this, but the event was also experienced by one of his daughters:

Ég var herna einhverntíman að koma úr fjörunni og gekk herna fyrir höfðann og er að koma herna, er á milli herna eiginlega höfðans og hússins herna. Þá heyrir ég eins og messusöng. [...] Ég hugsa já ég hef gleymt að slökkva á útvarpinu, og ég labba herna upp að húsi og ... og það er ekkert. Það er slökkt á útvarpinu. Ég labba aftur niður eftir, herna á milli. Þá heyrir ég svona eins og messusöng í messu. [...] En ég greindi ekki orðin, en þetta var svona eins og sálmar sem eru sungnir við messu. Þetta var svo greinilegt. Ég fór að hugsa er áin, árniðurinn eitthvað að leika sér við mig, er hann eitthvað að spila inni og ég fer að svona hlusta eftir því og hlusta eftir þessu. Neeei, það er ekki áin. Svo, einhverju seinna... það hefur líklega verið sama sumar. Þá er dóttir mín að labba herna í fjörunni og hún verður vör við þetta líka. Hún heyrir svona eins og sé verið að flytja messu inni hamrinum og lýsir þessu alveg eins og ég upplifði þetta. En þetta er náttúrulega eitthvað sem að maður getur ekki skýrt.

I was coming from the shore and walked past the Höfði, in between the Höfði and the house. Then I heard as if someone was singing at a mass. I thought I had forgotten to turn off the radio. I walked to the house but then there was no singing, and the radio was off. I walked to the Höfði

again and then I heard singing as at a mass. This was so clear. I started listening to see if the sound of the river could be tricking me. No, that was not it. Then a while later, I think it was later that summer, my daughter was walking on the shore and she noticed the same thing. It sounded as though there is a mass going on in the rocks and described it just as I had experienced it. But this is naturally something that one cannot explain.

As Lárus talks about them, the elves in the rocks are much like the inhabitants of Calvino's invisible city of Isidora. They are the company that human beings long for in the wild regions. They are a bit rough on some occasions and offer some erotic tingling on others, but mostly they are just there, living enchanted lives. Therefore, the stories told about them enchant the lives of those living near them. They offer what human beings desire in uninhabited areas and fill their emptiness. Again, in Lárus's words:

Þegar að maður var að byrja herna, manni fannst svona eins og það væri verið að fylgjast með manni. Maður væri ekki alveg einn herna. Ég meina það á jákvæðan hátt.

When I was starting out here, I felt as if I was being watched. I wasn't quite alone here, you know. I mean this in a positive way.

Already in 1940, the Icelandic scholar Einar Ólafur Sveinsson suggested that the Icelandic belief in elves, located as it is in a thinly populated landscape, answers to the longing of people for human society. It fills the rocks and hills of the natural environment with people to provide the people with company (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 2003, p. 290). This also fits de Certeau's statement that 'there is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can "invoke" or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in' (de Certeau 1984, p. 108). In Brúará, the living storytelling about its elves keeps this mechanism fully functional to this day. The supernatural entities that haunt this place in its stories fill it with life and thus make it habitable (cf. Egeler 2024a).

However, from this follows a question. If it is this easy to enrich human dwelling with otherworldly splendour, why do we not all live enchanted lives in the company of the beings of enchantment? Yet again, Calvino offers an answer, and yet again this answer dovetails remarkably well with Strandir folk tradition.

Technology and dystopia

The last city described in the *Invisible Cities* is Berenice. It is a city of technology, of machines and wires and pipes and pulleys and pistons and counterweights. It is a city of great cogged wheels and ticking mechanisms. It is a city of the unjust, and of those that are so convinced of being just that their malignant self-righteousness, in turn, makes them unjust (Calvino 1974, pp. 161–163). This city concludes a major thematic arch of Calvino's book. The first parts of the *Invisible Cities* use images of orientalizing beauty, desire, and dreams. They are full of enchantment and erotic fantasies. In the second half of the book, however, the character of Calvino's *Invisible Cities* slowly shifts. New themes are introduced, and little by little become dominant. They turn away from fantasies of beauty towards the nightmares of modernity, that is, over-consumption that results in exploding amounts of waste and rubbish which threaten to bury everything (1974, pp. 114–116), overpopulation (1974, pp. 146–147), suburban sprawl (1974, pp. 152–153, 156–158), environmental destruction and species extinction (1974, pp. 159–160). From the utopian cities that dominated the early parts

of the book, its vignettes eventually transform into dystopias. The city of technology and the unjust, Berenice, is the end and culmination point of this development, that is, the unfolding of the worst aspects of the modern city. From this modern city, all enchantment has disappeared.

In the invisible city of Berenice, the disappearance of enchantment relates to the prevalence of modern technology and all that goes with it. In Brúará, Lárus likewise hypothesizes that the disappearance of the elves from modern urban areas may be connected to the spread of modern technology. In this case, he sees the main culprit in the electrical grid:

Maður hefur oft velt því fyrir sér, þegar maður er að leika sé með þessa hugmynd, þessi öfl, eða hvað þetta er, maður hefur ekki heyrt neinar huldufólksögur, allavega ekki sem ég hef séð, frá þeim tíma þegar að rafmagnið kemur í bæinn. En ekki þar fyrir að það sé útaf því að það hafi ekki verið nægileg lýsing að fólk sé að sjá svona. Maður fer að velja þessu fyrirbæri fyrir sér, hvort að rafmagnsvæðingin hefur fælt huldufólkið á hérna óbyggðari staði. [...] En hérna er ekki net rafmagn, þetta er allt, eins og ég segi hérna er þráðlaust rafmagn. Það eru sólarsellur. Þannig að rafmagnið kemur frá sólinni.

I have often wondered, when I am playing around with this idea, these forces, or whatever this is, or if it is, that where farms are connected to the electrical grid, I don't think I have heard any stories of hidden people there, from the time when this kind of electricity was installed on the farms. But I don't believe the reason is that there wasn't enough light before, and that is why people saw these things. I rather wonder whether the electricity has pushed the hidden people to more remote places [...] Here I don't have this sort of electricity, I have solar panels, so the electricity comes from the sun.

The idea that development drives out supernatural entities has a long history. British nineteenth-century literature had already connected the disappearance of the fairies with the expansion of the railway network (Young 2012). Also folklorist Valdimar Hafstein has highlighted that in Icelandic stories of hidden people, in the present, they often appear in a connection with the agricultural society of the past. The hidden people today appear as a reflection of human society as it is described in folktale collections from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, in the twentieth century, massive changes took place in human society. Meanwhile, nothing seems to have changed in the world of the hidden people as they appear in stories from the late twentieth century, which carefully situate them in the past. People's ideas of them are coloured by how the hidden people are described in the old legend collections. At the same time, their main role today has fundamentally changed. In contemporary Iceland, the idea has become common that they protect nature and often object to development and urban expansion, stopping road- and

housebuilding. In present-day Iceland, the hidden people have come to represent both the past and nature. Stories of them are often a little nostalgic, as shown in the case of Lárus (Valdimar Hafstein 2000, 2003). While Lárus believes that the elves of Brúará are still there, he has not seen or heard them ever since he built a second, larger house to provide space for his family:

Ég hef ekkert orðið var við neitt eftir að ég byrjaði á nýja húsinu, stóra húsinu. Kannski af því að maður hefur bara alltaf verið á útopnu, aldrei gefið sér neitt færi þú veist að svona núllstilla sig við náttúruna.

I haven't experienced anything since I started building the new house, the large house. Maybe because I have just been so busy, never taken the time to, you know, reset myself with nature.

To become aware of the enchantment that the old stories speak of, in Lárus's view, one has to 'reset oneself with nature'. Here, the storytelling landscape of Brúará seems to for a moment leave the themes that Calvino treats in his *Invisible Cities*. And yet it does not. In Calvino's narrative, environmental degradation, the proliferation of waste dumps, and the extinction of animal species herald his dystopian vision of the modern city (Calvino 1974, pp. 114–116, 159–160). It may well be that Calvino would entirely agree with Lárus and the folk tradition of Brúará. What the city of modernity needs, also if seen through the lens of his *Invisible Cities*, is exactly that – a resetting with nature, opening the richness of human imaginings of nature. At the former farm of Brúará, on the edge of human habitation on the shores of the Arctic Ocean, it becomes clear that the city and the country are not spaces that are diametrically opposed. Both are places of human dwelling whose magic is formulated in stories. How the main elements of these stories even in as remote a place as Brúará follow key themes of the *Invisible Cities* strikingly shows how many of Calvino's observations are still both valid and timely well beyond the time and place of his day.

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