

LIQUID GROUND

A Response by Sarah Thomas to Elín Jakobsdóttir's *In the First Place*

What is it to look? What is it to see with the eyes of many places and generations?

Thought and memory. Material and ephemeral. Fluidity. Even the glass of a windowpane is a liquid that moves slowly, beyond the span of our attention. Touch it. Can you feel it, moving?

In the First Place takes place between two settings, aesthetically and fundamentally. The camera shifts between two locations - a Glasgow tenement studio and an Icelandic house. But it takes place - comes alive, activates - in the tension between what these two places represent.

The first moments of the film establish its language: the gaze, material composition yielding ephemeral truths, selves always in formation. Both places are made significant - archetypal perhaps - through a boy assuming an identical pose and gesture in respect of each: his hand pressed against a window pane as his gaze travels beyond it. A boy who we might call the 'protagonist', but who, more than acting, acts upon and is himself acted upon by these places, these materials. He embodies a sense of questioning, looking, probing at existence, occupying space and testing its limits.

The view from the first window is the stone blocks of other tenements at a height. The view from the other window is the bright expansiveness of a wildflower meadow, glimpsed like a strong memory. We return to the tenement studio. A neutral space: window, floor, boy. Elements which constellate to generate possibilities for image making, representation, boundary-pushing. The studio is part of an old building in an industrial city, its multiple occupancy hinted at by the shared stairwell. Others exist here.

The large house overlooking the meadow is in Eyrarbakki, Iceland. It is a well-cared for place, the furniture precisely arranged, highly polished surfaces reflecting the summer light and reflecting the boy who sits at the glass topped table. Læknishúsið - 'The Doctor's House': the last house still to be owned by Jakobsdóttir's extended family - one in which she never lived, but whose presence is held by all the people who have used it - living and deceased; collectively maintained across a continuum of time.

*What is on the other side of that slow liquid? Who is 'yourself' in another?
Which are the places that make you?*

Photographs of those ancestors hang on the walls, returning their gaze through picture glass. Tools from trades past become ornaments: sewing machine, weighing scales. What was made here? What decisions were made here? Who was healed here? The house vibrates with the energy of a place which has agency; which expresses its own wishes to its caretakers. There is an eternal sense of someone having just left, moments before Jakobsdóttir arrived with her camera, and the boy arrived with his questioning gestures.

Can you feel it, moving? Even the ground this house stands upon was once liquid.

These two places are not equal, but equally significant in their ability to create a third space, in which questions are lived - ungraspable, slippery - changing with each asking of them. Each place possesses a psychological weight which acts upon the other, revelatory and obscuring in turn.

What is home? Where is home? What is 'a house,' actually? How might we test its body, its limits? How does it touch us back?

In the Glasgow studio the boy looks first at his own reflection, and then at a man on the other side of it, with whom he is comfortable to speak, intimate. His father? A relative - *frændi*? Icelandic uses the same word - *frændi* - for any male relative, younger or older, which makes categories of time collapse, and the line of time instead becomes spiral and branch. The boy moves as in a dream, an expression of these questions, as he places his body, regards, explores the edges of where he finds himself.

Glass becomes a canvas, and with blue paint - a recurring motif - he traces a portrait of the man's face. Liquid lines pulled down by gravity. This gesture is repeated later with an older boy - brother? *Frændi*? Related or not, generational time is unfolding here.

Then, a new constellation, a new gesture: floor, canvas, brush, and blue paint. The boy paints an outline of a human body, then transcends its boundaries and obliterates its form to fill the canvas entirely with blue. A new object with which to question these places. A new protagonist to join him.

The boy wraps himself in this blue square; throws its weight from a height in both places, from stairwells and top floor windows, across floors. At the Doctor's House, this place of ancestors, it evolves imperceptibly from a crumpled square to a bag-like form, like a vessel ready to contain or protect a body. In this form it transitions from objecthood to personhood. He treats it delicately: a companion he sits opposite at the table. A companion he places at a desk. A companion with whom he waits.

From the top floor of this Icelandic house, the sea. It seems to call the boy and the square equally. Tracing the topography between here and there - flying, dragging - they travel to the shore, to dissolve their questions into liquid once more.

Is the sea in fact the very first place?