

The Line That Will Not Stay Still

An island, a concrete sphere, and a border that is walking away.

7 min read

Before you read

- **arbitrary** — decided by choice rather than by any natural rule
- **convention** — an agreement that people treat as if it were fact
- **latitude** — how far north or south of the equator a place lies
- **oscillate** — to swing slowly back and forth between two limits
- **increment** — a small, regular step in a larger change
- **cumulative** — building up over time until the total matters
- **intangible** — real in its effects, but impossible to touch or measure
- **prestige** — the respect a place or person is granted by others



The island of Grímsey, forty kilometres off the northern coast of Iceland

¹ Fewer than a hundred people live on Grímsey, a windswept island roughly forty kilometres off the northern coast of Iceland. There are more puffins than residents, by a margin no one has ever bothered to calculate precisely. The ferry takes three hours in good weather and does not run at all in bad. And yet visitors come, year after year, to do one specific thing: stand on a line.

² The line is the Arctic Circle, and Grímsey is the only piece of Iceland it touches. Standing on it earns you a certificate at the island's small shop. Photographs are taken. One foot in the Arctic, one foot out — that is the pose, and nobody has invented a better one.

³ The difficulty is that the line is not painted on the ground, and it is not a thing you could trip over. It is a calculation. The Arctic Circle sits at whatever latitude marks the southern limit of the midnight sun — the furthest south you can stand and still watch the sun refuse to set at midsummer. Work out that latitude and you have the line. At the moment it falls at about sixty-six degrees and thirty-three minutes north.

⁴ The latitude depends on the tilt of the Earth's axis, and the tilt does not hold still. Over a cycle of roughly forty-one thousand years it oscillates between about 22.1 and 24.5 degrees. We are currently in the part of that cycle where the tilt is slowly decreasing, which drags the Arctic Circle northwards at a rate of approximately fourteen metres a year.

⁵ Fourteen metres is nothing. You could walk it while reading this sentence. But the increments are cumulative, and Grímsey is a small island. In 2017 the islanders accepted the arithmetic and commissioned a sculpture: Orbis et Globus, a concrete sphere some three metres across and weighing around eight tonnes, placed on the line.



Orbis et Globus, the concrete sphere moved each summer to the recalculated line

⁶ Every summer it is measured, lifted by machine and set down a few metres further north. It is probably the only monument in the world with a published schedule for its own relocation.

⁷ The schedule also has an ending. Continue the sums and the Arctic Circle walks off the northern tip of Grímsey around the year 2047 and out into the Greenland Sea. When that happens the artists intend the sphere to follow it, over the cliff and into the water. The island will keep its puffins, its cliffs, its three hours of ferry. It will lose a line that was never physically there.

⁸ It is worth asking what exactly is being lost. The weather on Grímsey will not change by one degree in 2047. The birds will not notice. No current will shift, no ice will form or fail to form, because a number crossed a coastline. The Arctic Circle is a convention — an agreement about where to draw a line, useful precisely because everyone agrees to it, and arbitrary in the sense that nature never signed the document.

⁹ And yet conventions do real work. Time zones are conventions. So are borders, the International Date Line, and the agreement that a metre is this long and not slightly longer. We organise entire economies around lines that exist only because we have decided to honour them. What Grímsey stands to lose is intangible: the prestige of being the place where Iceland touches the Arctic, and the modest but real stream of visitors that prestige brings to an island with one shop.

¹⁰ There is something almost comic about the annual ritual — a tractor, a tape measure, eight tonnes of concrete shuffling north like a very slow animal. But the comedy is the point. A monument is normally built to insist that something stayed: a battle was fought here, a treaty signed here, a person stood here. Orbis et Globus insists on the opposite. It marks something that is leaving, and it has agreed to leave with it.

¹¹ Somewhere around 2047, a few islanders will walk a concrete sphere the last of its distance and watch it go into the sea. There will be no change in the temperature, no shift in the light. Only a line, moving on, exactly as it was always going to.

Part A Choose the best answer

Circle the letter next to the right answer.

1. According to the passage, why does the Arctic Circle move northwards?
 - A Sea levels are rising around Iceland
 - B The tilt of the Earth's axis is slowly decreasing
 - C The island of Grímsey is drifting southwards
 - D Mapmakers have corrected an earlier mistake
2. At what rate does the passage say the line moves?
 - A About fourteen metres each year
 - B About fourteen metres each decade
 - C About forty-one metres each year
 - D About three metres each summer
3. What is Orbis et Globus?
 - A A certificate issued at the island's shop
 - B The Icelandic name for the Arctic Circle
 - C A concrete sphere that is repositioned each year
 - D A ferry that runs only in good weather
4. The writer says the Arctic Circle is “a convention”. In this passage, that means it is
 - A a mistake that has never been corrected
 - B a natural feature that is difficult to see
 - C an agreement people honour rather than a physical thing
 - D a tradition invented by visitors to the island
5. Which of these does the passage say will NOT change when the line leaves Grímsey?
 - A The island's weather and wildlife
 - B The number of visitors to the island
 - C The island's claim to Arctic status
 - D The position of the concrete sphere

Part B Write your answer

Answer in three or four sentences, using evidence from the passage.

6. Explain why the writer calls Orbis et Globus a monument to something that is leaving. How is it different from most monuments?

7. The passage argues that the line is arbitrary, and also that its loss matters. Explain how both of these can be true at the same time.

8. Why do you think the writer describes the yearly move as “almost comic”, and then says the comedy is the point? Use the passage in your answer.

Part C Think deeper

There is no single right answer here. Take a position and justify it.

9. The islanders could simply leave the sphere where it is and tell visitors the line has moved. Should they? Give your position and the strongest argument against it.

10. Name one boundary in your own life that exists by agreement rather than in physical form — a deadline, a rule, an age limit, a border. What would actually change if it moved, and what would only seem to change?

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. B | 2. A | 3. C | 4. C | 5. A

Part B

6. Most monuments mark something that stayed in place — a battle, a treaty, a person. The sphere marks a line that is moving away and is designed to be moved with it, and eventually to go into the sea. Credit any answer that contrasts permanence with deliberate impermanence and uses a detail from the text.

7. The line has no physical existence and changes nothing about the weather, the birds or the sea, so in that sense it is arbitrary. But its effects are real: certificates, visitors, income and standing. Strong answers separate physical consequence from social consequence. Weaker answers simply restate that the line is not real.

8. The image of eight tonnes of concrete being shuffled north by tractor is absurd; that absurdity highlights how seriously people take an invisible agreement, which is the writer's actual argument. Accept any answer that links the humour to the point about conventions.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the answer.

9. A strong answer takes a clear position and then states the best case against it — for example, that honesty is the attraction, or that visitors would feel cheated, or that the sculpture's meaning depends on it being accurate. Mark the willingness to argue the other side, not the position chosen.

10. Any honest example works. The skill being practised is the distinction between real consequence and perceived consequence. Prompt with: what would be physically different the next morning?

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