

Like an animal,  
I seemed to hesitate.

They saw me as a soul—  
one who’d listen.

The waves across my red rock  
spelled a skin,

filled in  
    blanks of speech,  
translating *halt* by degrees.

The coast redrawn:  
    a twined lexicon

where nouns are never still.

To read,  
select an area of the lava  
    lit with moss

and eat.

Let the fluent body  
redefine heaven

as something more than human.

*Source text: McPhee, John. “Cooling the Lava.” The Control of Nature. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1989.*  
*Photo: Katy Didden. 2016. Image and layout: Kevin Tseng.*  
*From Ore Choir: The Lava on Iceland (Tupelo Press, 2022). This poem first appeared in Tupelo Quarterly.*

Like an iceberg that had calved off a glacier, the great bulk of the north side of the volcano remained afloat in a molten sea. It was a mountain in itself, and, moreover, it moved. It was landscape on the loose, an incongruous itinerant alp, its summit high above the lava plain, its heading north by northwest. The mobile mountain had a nine-acre base and a sharp peak. It weighted two million tons. People looking up from almost any street in town could see its silhouette filling the sky—today in one place, tomorrow in another. Someone named it Flakkarinn. And no one ever called it anything else. Flakkarinn the Wanderer.

The pressure wave that was created when Flakkarinn came off the volcano moved through the lava for a number of days and squeezed from the periphery new freshets of red rock. Some of this was in the lobe that stopped at the harbor wall. Flakkarinn, sliding downhill, also made bow waves in the molten lava through which it plowed. And as it went along it dug a kind of trough. Lava filled in behind it. Where Flakkarinn broke the crust of the earlier flow, fresh streams of molten material poured forth. People climbed up and rode on Flakkarinn. It shook as it travelled. In its first two weeks, it went half a mile.

If all of this had happened on a different vector, it might have been merely entertaining. But Flakkarinn was headed for the harbor. If one of its advance waves had nearly overtopped the harbor wall, what might be expected when Flakkarinn itself arrived at the same place? When the Wanderer reached the harbor, the harbor would become a hill.

A plan was developed to stop Flakkarinn. The dramatics at the harbor wall had amply demonstrated that pumped seawater could affect both the motion and the final position of the right kind of lava. As Þorbjörn explained, “all this was possible only because the lava was thick, viscous, and moving slowly.” (In what is now the United States’ Pacific Northwest, an eruption once buried in three or four days an area the size of Iceland. As they say in Olympia, try watering that.) To mount an attempt to obstruct Flakkarinn, all available pumps were requested from the Americans in Keflavik, from the Civil Defense in Reykjavik—and transports arrived full of pumps. The strategy was straightforward: Select an area of the lava lying in Flakkarinn’s path, and pump enough water onto it to get below the surface rind and increase in size and number the columnar cracks that characterize basalt as it cools. Then more seawater, saturating the cracks, would reach all the way to the impermeable molten center of the flow, solidifying an over-all mass sufficient to block Flakkarinn.

When Þorbjörn was reviewing these events with me, he said, “This ship Sandey, it had some steel pipes over half a metre in diameter that were very heavy and difficult to handle. After we got the bulldozers up on the lava and put the pipes there, the lava moved, and the pipes, of course, broke. There were some very courageous men who managed to keep the pipes intact, more or less, most of the

“It was iron pipe put together with nuts and bolts,” Sigurdur Jonsson recalled. “The lava would move it a good distance overnight. While you were repairing it, if there was a big explosion in the volcano the air pressure came like a wave and could shake you.”



Meteors petrify me—  
dead matter

vanished into  
the scantiest of tracks:

a white flare,  
eerily anonymous.

I’m earth’s aorta,  
I thrum against erosion.

O spur of the alien cosmos

slinging nerves  
with feral nickels,

fall back into a flat curve  
just above our resting place.

Be no harbinger—

usher us godwards  
on the pulse of our surprise.

Source text: Morris, William. “Chapter II: From Reykjavik to Bergthorsknoll and Lithend (Monday, July 17th, in camp at Bolavellir).” Icelandic Journals. William Morris Archive, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, IA. Photo: Diana Khoi Nguyen, “Landmannalauger.” 2014. Image and Layout: Kevin Tseng . From Ore Choir: The Lava on Iceland (Tupelo Press, 2022). This poem first appeared in Kenyon Review.

Meantime we got off our horses, and sat down in a pretty grassy hollow, and the Icelanders brought out champagne and glasses to drink the stirrup-cup, for they were going back here: so in half an hour’s time we said goodbye for six weeks, and they mounted and turned back west, and we rode away east into a barren plain, where the road had vanished into the scantiest of tracks, and which was on the edge of the lava: soon we came on to the lava itself, grown over here with thick soft moss, grey like hoar-frost: this ended suddenly in a deep gully, on the other side of which all was changed as if by magic, for we were on a plain of short flowery grass as smooth as a lawn, a steep green bank bordering it all round, which on the south ran up into higher green slopes, and these into a great black rocky mountain: we rode on over the east side of the bank, and then again a change: a waste of loose large-grained black sand without a blade of grass on it, that changed in its turn into a grass plain again but not smooth this time; all ridged and thrown up into hummocks as so much of the grass land in Iceland is, I don’t know why: this got worse and worse till at last it grew boggy as it got near another spur of the lava-field, and then we were off it on to the naked lava, which was here like the cooled eddies of a molten stream: it was dreadful riding to me unused, but still as I stumbled along, as nervous as might be, I saw the guides galloping about over it as they drove the train along, with hard work, at a smart trot: for me, I didn’t understand it at all, and hung behind a good way in company of Faulkner: but we were getting near our camping ground now, and the peaked mountain-wall lay before us, falling back into a flat curve just above our resting place: streams of lava tumbled down the mountain-sides here and there; notably on one to our north, Hengill by name; on whose flank its tossed-up waves looked most strangely like a great town in the twilight we were riding through now. Well, Faulkner and I pushed on as well as we could, and at last saw the lava end in the first green slopes of the hill-spurs, where Magnusson stood by his horse waiting for us: we rode gladly enough on to the grass, and, turning a little, cantered along the slope and down into a plain that lay in the bight under the hills, in the middle of which I saw the train come to a stand: so riding through a moss at the slope’s end we came into a soft grassy meadow bordered by a little clear stream and jumped off our horses after a ride of six hours and a half. It was a cold night though clear and fine, and we fell hard to work to unpack the tents and pitch them while the guides unburden the horses, who were soon rolling about in every direction, and then set to work diligently to feed:



Words start war  
and then war

is wordless.  
Mistranslated missive,

a missile  
begins as emotion,

a sense the enemy  
is animal

like you.  
All life, brief

as disaster,  
echoes the bang,

and human code  
coils around

a single fuse.  
At the frayed ends,

world leaders  
ink out the legacy

of manias.  
Aimless, that labor.

What then is Reykjavik's legacy? Gorbachev warned Reagan at Reykjavik that their window of opportunity was narrow. "Time passed; things changed," the Soviet leader said; if they failed to agree, "Reykjavik would be simply a memory" (NSAEBB, 2006:13:7). Circumstances have changed in the subsequent 25 years. The global balance of power has transitioned from a bipolar equilibrium to a messier arrangement, shifting US priorities from arms cuts to nonproliferation. Post-New START, US and Russian arsenals still outstrip the rest of the world's combined. With nuclear weapon numbers projected to double in South Asia in 10 years though, US leadership is more vital than ever to building unity among nations against an overreliance on nuclear deterrence (Yusuf and Pandya, 2010). The global nonproliferation regime needs reinforcement to reverse long-term nuclear proliferations and stockpiling trends. As rising powers exert more influence, US support for Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which requires its signatories to pursue "good-faith" talks on nuclear disarmament, is more important than ever.

A deepened US commitment to disarmament talks and arms control treaties would strengthen the international system of laws, norms, and institutions that currently moderates nuclear risks. Unfortunately, US support for international treaties has waned, as evinced by the congressional commotion over New START's ratification. Knee-jerk opposition to diplomatic achievements runs counter to Reagan's record on arms control. In the absence of military will, prudent and constructive diplomacy remains the primary instrument of the national interest. Swift congressional ratification of the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty would signal that nuclear disarmament remains at the heart of US global engagement.

The manifest continuities that link the historical contexts of 1986 and 2011 in fact indicate that disarmament remains a viable and beneficial end goal. Economic problems in the Soviet Union were a primary spur for Reykjavik. Current US fiscal pressures make military cuts inescapable. Drawing down the overbuilt US nuclear arsenal could serve a dual purpose, however, repairing the federal budget while improving the prospects of US nonproliferation initiatives. The recent nuclear disaster in Japan meanwhile echoes the tragedy at Chernobyl. The Soviet meltdown opened the eyes of many to the ungovernable hazards of nuclear power and war. It certainly impelled Gorbachev to make nuclear disarmament a central feature of his diplomatic agenda. The disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station holds a corresponding warning for contemporary leaders and the public and should serve a similarly cautionary purpose.

Reykjavik's foremost lesson, however, is the crucial importance of leadership. Reagan called Reykjavik a "major turning point in the quest for a safer and secure world" (Gaddis, 2005: 366). Gorbachev and Reagan built the trust necessary to use the window of opportunity afforded them at Reykjavik to peer over the horizon at a nuclear-free world. That window is opening today. What the world needs are leaders with the courage, imagination, and will to look through it. Until then, the legacy of Reykjavik will remain in the vagueness of its ambitions and the smallness of that one word—"laboratory."

Source text: Walker, Paul F. and Jonathan R. Hunt. "The legacy of Reykjavik and the future of nuclear disarmament." *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, 67.6, 2011. p. 63-72.  
Photo: Britt Hultgren. 2016. Image and Layout: Kevin Tseng.  
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Out of the ashes

elves

startle realms.

The thickness of sky,

they go

where sky is radiant

in a mask of stars,

unmarred.

## Why make your own yogurt?

I get this question from time to time.

The main reason is that the yogurt

I find on the shelves is too sweet.

I want real yogurt and less sugar. I also

really missed the thickness of skyr,

the yogurt from my home, Iceland,

where skyr is as traditional as apple pie

is in the States. So in 2004 I started

making my own skyr at home. After some

gruesome trial and error, as well

as funny faces from friends, it started

to taste rather delicious.

Source text: Siggi's yogurt label. Distributed by: The Iceland Milk & Skyr Corp. 135 West 26th St. NY, NY 10001.

Photo: Kevin Tseng. "Grábrók." 2016. Image and Layout: Kevin Tseng.

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