



While little Gvendur was content to meditate upon those animals which stand higher in the scale of honour than sheep, or to make an attempt to multiply the lambs by the ewes and subtract the bones in the rook from the plunks in the flock—little Nof, you, tirelessly of his comrade, feeling that what he had done was a valid proof of his own existence and that he would not be dismissed the third year after he had done his duty, he did not care for kind words, and he who wanted to comfort little children, and little Sofija, she who soared on wings of poetry into the spheres, with she had sensed as if a distant murmur of a song, as last year when she was reading, and the little girl had journeyed over the seven mountains, and the distant murmur had suddenly swelled to a song in her ears, and her soul found here, for the first time, its origin and its descent; happiness, fate, sorrow, she understood them all, and many other things. When a man looks at the hovering plan, growing, slender and helpless, up in the wilderness, among a hundred thousand stones, and he has found this plant only by chance, then he asks, Why is it that this is always trying to burst forth? Could one not take this plant and use it to clean one's pipe? To see this plant, as of broods over the limitation and the unlimitedness of all life, and lives in love of the world beyond these hundred thousand stones, like you, and like water in the sea, but not to uproot it, and that is little Sofija.

Primary Text: Laxness, Halldór. Independent People: An Epic. J. Anderson Thompson, trans. New York: A. A. Knopf, 1946.

Wild comes the molten ore
out of the earth
 daydreaming.
Onto the sphere
it murmmers in gashes,
girl-eyed over the seven mountains
 and swelled to a song.
Here a soul found the origin:
 desire
 under all other things.
So an ogled ruin
 widens
among a hundred thousand stones
and fantasy twins the earth
to the unlimited.
 In love,
beyond these stones,
 like water,
I rise.

*Primary Photo (page 30): Howell, Frederick W. W. "Gorge in Angle (Ejyafjal-lajokul)." Collection of Icelandic and Faroese Photographs of Frederick W. W. Howell. Cornell University Library. ca. 1900.
Text & Photo Layout: Kevin Tseng*

We got to the Godafoss and I had some coffee while the Germans went to admire. One waterfall is extraordinarily like another. We didn't get to Myvatn till three o'clock and I was hungry and seedy and cross. The lake is surrounded by little craters like candle snuffers and most attractive. Hay was being made everywhere and the haymakers were using aluminum rakes, which I have never seen before. I had to make arrangements for an old German and his beautiful daughter who knew no English or Icelandic, who wanted to go to Detlifoss but didn't know if they dare. Papa was afraid it was too much for daughter and daughter that it was too much for Papa, especially the horses. As he can't have weighed a pound under 16 stone, it is the horses who should worry. Afterwards I lay in the sun watching the hay being made and taking photographs. If I can get them developed in time, and any of them come out, I'll send you some. It's a pity I am so impatient and careless, as any ordinary person could learn all the technique of photography in a week. It is the demotic art, i.e. technical skill is practically eliminated — the more fool-proof cameras become with focusing and exposure gadgets the better — and artistic quality depends only on choice of subject. There is no place for the professional still photographer and his work is always awful. The only decent photographs are scientific ones and amateur snapshots, only you want a lot of the latter to make an effect. A single still is never very interesting by itself. (1939)

Primary Text: Auden, W. H. and Louis MacNeice. Letters from Iceland. London: Faber and Faber, 1937. Reissued in 1985.

God moans—

an eye roving
across the lake.

Little craters in the wake
were scenes I arranged—

to see
is to add shape.

Then God
undoes the holds:

a singing motion

I am pre-species,
the demon-loosing

exposure,

astonishing
(*o seraphs rename us*)

the living.

*Primary Photo (opposite): Howell, Frederick W. W. "The semi-defunct Strokkur."
Collection of Icelandic and Faroese Photographs of Frederick W. W. Howell.
Cornell University Library. ca. 1900.
Text & Photo Layout: Kevin Tseng*