

The Way Home

from *Landings: Poems from Iceland*

By Harold Rhenisch

A Circular Poem

An old word from the North lies deep within this poem. You know it, too. It is "world." It is a circular spherical space, both full like a raindrop and empty like a cavern at the base of a sea cliff, where an old lava tube has been hollowed out by the waves. You might call it a ball, as I do in The Green Earth Dictionary (<https://earthwords.net>), like this:



Ball: a spherical swelling, the shape of the mouth holding back a blow of air, cast into the world. A ball is always taut with energy, because only that universal pressing against a boundary makes it a ball. A ball is the point at which body and air merge. That is, until the body can't hold the pressure back any more. <https://earthwords.net/2020/06/22/ball/>

A *world* is not a lonely word. We all know it well, for instance, and the other words that express its same energy, such as whirl, whirlpool, even hurricane and hurl. "I will hurl myself off a cliff," we say (well, I hope not), meaning we will give ourselves to the primal energy of, well, the world. "Don't throw your life away," we say, meaning don't cast it away with a hand following the cut an arm makes in the sphere of earth and body and sky.

In Iceland, this energy is known as *orkan*, living on in the new dialect of the North, English, as *work*, the transformation one thing works upon another as it transfers force to it: the flight made by a wing pressing on air, for instance, the knife made by a hammer striking hot iron, or the measurable heat and light given off by a candle.



An Ogre in Arnarstapi

In *The Way Home*, this world is both the Earth and a human mouth, which is sometimes full and sometimes empty, just like the lungs which give it air and voice from their place in the boat hull of the chest. To them, the mouth is a sail, catching the wind and giving it direction. This poem is mouth music, in other words, danced from sounds made in a human mouth that is both a wind instrument and a drum. Yes, a drum. Sometimes the tongue that twines itself with this breath to make sound comes up against the roof of the mouth and the wall of the teeth and makes clicks and snaps like footsteps and rock falling. Sometimes, language is scree sliding out from underfoot. Watch your step!

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*Lóndrangar Sea Stacks at Malarif
Looking West from the Latraborg Bird Cliffs*

An Embodied Poem

Welcome to Malarif, the chattering cliffs of West Iceland, where the land speaks through the throats of millions of sea birds. Ironically, here the edge of the world is not its end, but its beginning.

Obviously, *The Way Home* is printed on a page and read from there, yet it is also a dance between mouth and ear, beginning with the observation that

you don't get to choose the place
that is the edge of the known world,

and ending on a cliff, without falling among seabirds into the night sea. After all, when a mouth speaks, an ear hears, even where understanding doesn't follow. Bodies are given space here, and the dignity of their own knowledge. By the poem's close, we are at home on Earth and not in the

heights of sun and light, the primary symbols of space in 18th -21st Century Enlightenment culture. A different Enlightenment is present here, and a different orientation of body and planet. To speak as this poem does, it is the way home.

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A Landing on the Greenland Sea

The Thing About the Line Breaks

To demonstrate this grounding, *The Way Home* inhabits its own space. It is danced in the mouth, in the pauses between breaths that it rides like gannets soaring out from black stone in the rain. Its lines are these breaths that its sentences ride across. The effect is of a fishing boat rising and dropping with the swells.

The lines are also the cliffs at this edge of Iceland. From here, only the endless ocean continues. By the poem's close, the reversal of sounds made by a taut tongue holds you from falling out of the poem. It appears to end abruptly but doesn't. It holds you. It does fulfill its promise of bringing you to a new world, but with no little irony, for it is the old one. Socrates' old adage, "Know yourself," finds physical expression here. The cliffs drop straight off. You turn around and go home.

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Of Lines and Chattering Cliffs

Mouths shape sounds into stories, which are commonly called words, and combine those into extended dances. New words and their sounds are integrated by recombining sounds across the ends and openings of breaths. The long patterns created in this way are the rhythms of the lung and a living mouth working around its pauses, commonly called lines, stanzas, breaks and punctuation.

These effects are set against a cross-stitch pattern woven from a strand of clicks made with tongue and teeth ("t", "d" and "k") and a second strand hovering in the cavern of the mouth ("e", "a" and "i"). Any sound thrown into it is like a stone thrown into a pool of water. It makes ripples, which wash outwards and catch water beetles, flies, and leaves in their energy, transferring some of its energy to them. The waves of the stanzas allow for weight to shift and reverse, like a loom. Syllable patterns and line ends add or subtract weights, allowing introduced sounds to fit the pattern and be integrated in it.

All of these patterns are read by the ear in the way an eye reads a painting. For instance, the stanza...

It is November. The light is coming in flat
across the North Atlantic.

... consists of three statements: "It is November," "The light is coming in flat," and "across the North Atlantic." All express the same observation:

In November, light comes in flat across the North Atlantic.

The poem, though, says more. The placement of these three points of view around breaths asserts that November *is* the light coming in flat across the North Atlantic. It is a physical force, not an abstraction, not a month in a calendar but just this light, this water, this standing here, right now. I could have called the poem *November*, but that would have abstracted it, while the poem is all about inhabiting its own space. Besides, the first line of the stanza has been flattened out and lengthened (as light itself is at the end of an Autumn day in Iceland), sped up through its length, and, quite literally, lies across its following line, "across the North Atlantic." Really. It lies right above it. Look:

The light is coming in flat
across the North Atlantic.

The waves of the ocean are there in the mixed "o", "s", "r", "n", "t" and "c" sounds moving forward and back as a thought crosses the ocean that is the mouth. Look, it's like a photograph, but made in the ear,

ro ss th n or th n

as it rises and falls in chop, which landings amplify.



A Lava Field Gives the Sea Voice at Stemmuklettur in West Iceland

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Stories Within Words

In Enlightenment culture, words carry meanings. In that culture (contemporary North American culture is a part of this project), a boat is: “a small vessel propelled on water by oars, sails, or an engine.” Fair enough. There they are, pulled up on shore or riding the tide at a dock. We can climb in.



The Eagle Sea Stack (Arnarstapi) With Her Boats

In *The Way Home*, however, words dance their meanings, like this:

“Across” begins with wind out of an open throat, then moves from the back of the mouth to the front. There it escapes with a hiss, as waves do on a shore.

“Atlantic” is the motion of a wave rising, rolling, breaking and crashing down on a beach, ending in the tic of a pebble knocked against another as a wave ends and is cut off just as it begins to retreat, or a word is cut off from breath by a click at the back of the throat, where words originate in breath.

“Light” gives us an “i” high in the forehead, like the sun. It is followed by a breathy “gh”, which presses the energy of the “i” downwards to meet a “t”. It then

grounds out on the base of the mouth (or a field under an open sky.) This is a journey. It is a story, not a "meaning."

"Is" continues the story, by combining the heart of this high "i" with the "s" of "is". This combination softens the "i". It remains open and forward in the mouth and holds it from disappearing. The dancer has paused right at the front of the stage. We hold our breaths for a moment before she dances on. Look at the reversal...

The light is coming in flat
across the North Atlantic.

as the pressure of "light" calms the forward push of the "th" into the continuing "s" of "is."

Remember, though, that this weaving is a world. It is spherical. Accordingly, in the "th"- "s"'s steady forward thrust of wind on water, "light" rises high in the forehead, filling the deep towers and chambers of the sinus, right to the temples and then presses down and closes sharply on the teeth with a "t". It has made a ball, and set it down at the same time. The sun does the same above the water.

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How to Weave a World

Watch. We stand on the cliff at Malarif and look out to sea. Gradually, we still and enter the whole world washing over us, just as sounds wash through the mouth from throat to teeth and lips and away. In the following lines...

Sunrise is at noon, sunset at two:
from pastel blue to pink and,

faster and faster now, through
blood red and violet

...the "c" of "Atlantic" breaks apart and then reforms as "pink". Because the inward "l" of "pastel" and the outward "l" of blue divide into an "ast" chime ...

"pastel" = "faster and faster" ...

and a "bl" chime ...

"blue" = "blood" ...

... the crooning, joyful "oo" of "blue" becomes the breathless falling "uh" of "blood," without losing the height and hopefulness of "blue." Because of this shift of weight and position of breath, the formative words of the sentence, "sunrise," "sunset," "pastel" and "blue" recombine into "violet", which then echoes of "Atlantic," to close the pattern.



And that colour is, in fact, its Autumn colour approaching close of day. The Enlightenment world is here, but, I hope, given the dimensionality of the physical world. The poem stands in its own skin and doesn't look away, even long after we are gone. In this poem, we don't just glimpse the physical world. We move there.

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Exercises

Let's practice some of that. As my mentor Robin Skelton taught me, if you practice something intensely three times over three days, if you really give it a hard go, your subconscious will learn it while you sleep and dance it for you on your next attempt. I've learned that the trick is not to give it too much to work with all at once. As I have said to many people beginning their dance with poetry, if you start without any moves in your repertoire, you have none, but with one you can make a powerful gesture, with two you can make an invitation, and with three you can dance a story. Starting with a hundred would just be exhausting. So, let's start with three here, and have some fun.

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First exercise.

The Stories Within Words

Let's practice watching words as they dance their way through the stage of the mouth and go out on their journeys to the ear. You have three examples above. Here's another:

Clasp: the action of closing tightly but lightly. The throat clicks open with a "c", broadens out with an "l" squeezed tightly at both sides of the mouth, leaving the lips open, then opens into the "a" of an open mouth, shuts the teeth and lets air escape with the hiss of an "s", and then shuts tight with the light blown kiss of a "p". Instead of a hard click on closing, it makes a light touch, with a little pop of air.

Is that not an embodiment of a locket? Have you not actually physically and orally made a locket with your mouth and acted out its opening and closing? Is there not an image of your sweetheart inside it? Or a locket of your grandmother's hair? Does the ear not receive, and recreate the mouth forming it? Even as the mind goes to its dictionary and blurts out

Clasp: a device with interlocking parts used for fastening things together?

Aren't we doing that, only in the body as much as in the mind?

Now it's your turn. You can choose three words of your own. I suggest sticking with simple, physical words from Old English roots, rather than the abstractions of the French and Latin traditions. Those one include secondary ceremonial gestures. There's no need to get too complicated all at once. If you like, you can choose one from this list:

Island, water, steam, kettle, pot, porridge, land, gale, ship, hull, hold, grass, knife, climb.

Maybe this will help you get started:



Viðey at Sunrise, Ísland

An ancient monastic island and the resting place of the writer Gunnar Gunnarsson.

Island: an eye in the sea. A form of land defined by the water around it and embodying its character. Islands speak the water in the language of the land, making water readable, and inhabitable, by human bodies. Many humans can only live on islands. Many others look on them as points of isolation.
<https://earthwords.net/2014/03/06/island/>

Have fun! Watch where sounds are formed, how long they linger, and what pressure goes into them. In general,

Kk, Ck and Cc sounds are openings of the throat (or any sound creation out of nothing)

Ah sounds are continued breath (or anything sustained)

Ee sounds are continued excitement filling the bowl of the skull from the back of the mouth

Ii sounds do the same from the front and fill the nose and sinus and warms the prefrontal cortex

Pp and Bb sounds are formed with the lips and all its pensive and intimate expressions.

It is the most forward of all sounds, hence its appearance in *tip* and *top*.

Tt sounds are made with the tip (t) of the (t)ongue against the (t)eeth.

Ss and Ff sounds are made with breath. They are the sounds of continued action, of various lengths.

Ch sounds are chewing sounds. They are the sounds of temporary pressure.

Gg and Gh sounds are sounds of the throat, the sounds of the deep body.

And remember, where they fall in syllables or where a poem pushes those syllables through its rhythms subtly changes their meaning.

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Second exercise.

Changing Meaning through Rhythm, Chiming and Stress.

The journey of sound through the mouth and its embodiment in words can be recorded intimately on the page, down to fine gradations of tone, intent and meaning, by embedding it in larger structures, such as sentences, lines and stanzas.

Here's an example:

Sunrise is at noon, sunset at two:

Note how the repetitive chiming of Sunrise and Sunset changes the stresses. Instead of:

SUNrise is at noon

SUNset is at two

The arrangement has caught up "sunset" into a rhyme with "at" to create this:

SUNrise is at noon, sunSET at two.

As a result, a purely factual statement has become musical and gains a ceremonial tone. The shift of stress, carried by this rhyme, and the rocking motion of a boat lightly riding a swell, amplifies further in the next line, amplifying the normal second syllable stress on "pastel", as if the word is in italics, like this...

from pasTEL blue to pink and,

... and then passed on the "l" to "blue", which carries the stress, skipping over its original "t" now, even though it is still present...

faster and faster now, through

... and separating the "oo" of "blue" into "through", then, finally, giving us the long-delayed "I" again in...

blood red and violet ...

... and the long-delayed "t" and the "l" together in "violet," giving it more than normal weight. The ceremonial energy has been passed on, hand to hand, and given to it, and it shines. Late in the year in Iceland, the light changes so rapidly in the air that you can stand anywhere and watch it in the way we are all accustomed to watching a film in a cinema, except in Iceland the projector is the sun and you are *within* the film. It's pretty great.

The kind of repetition in "Sunrise is at noon, sunset at two" is an easy way to practice this technique. It should lead quite naturally to a musical pattern, at least over the next couple lines. Don't worry about being too precise about the repetition, just repeat some element strongly, so it can be easily recognized by the ear, like in this little scene from Iceland:

Pasture grass is mown when the dew passes, tossed all day
and baled at 4 a.m., two hours after dawn. Then, coffee.

Here, the repetition is not a word, but paired sounds across the punctuation, like this:

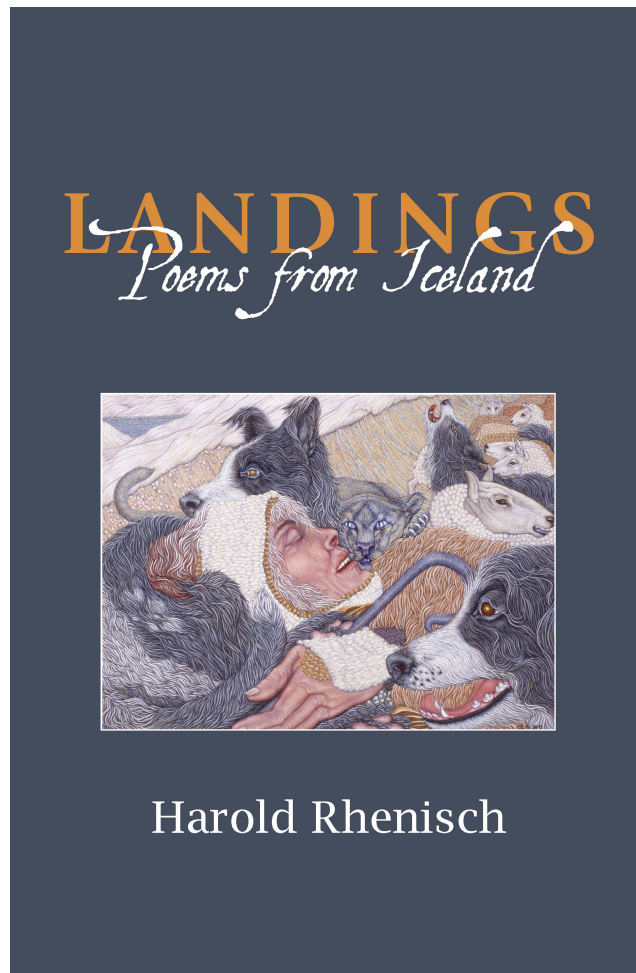
Passes, tossed
Dawn. Then

The half-rhyme of "day-coffee" holds them tightly together (as coffee sometimes does), even though the real rhymes come earlier. So, why not try that? To practice stanzas out of:

a repeat term (Sunrise, sunset),
a rhyme around punctuation (Dawn. Then)?

You will soon see how few notes you need to make a poem, and how varied they can be.

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The Poems Are All in Couplets, Yet Each is a Different Musical Variation

Third Exercise

Add Some Rhyme to Amplify the Pattern

Another option is a musical variation of a single term, drawing different meaning out of the same word, like this:

Every gate stone is heavy in the North.
My thoughts are heavy too. And yours?

Your task is to answer the question, keeping to the pattern of a repetition within the line and a rhyme or half-rhyme at the end.



An Old Gate Stone on the Road to the Glacier and the Deep South

Here's a variation, to practice:

Every gate stone is heavy in the North.
My thoughts are heavy. I doubt their worth.

“Doubt” and “worth” can both be read in different ways. Your task is to reverse the meaning of one by the end. For example, doubt is both a noun and a verb. You can have a lot of fun crossing that energy threshold. “Worth,” on the other hand is a relative term. It has more to do with valuation than a set rate of exchange. That gives you lots of room for irony.

At the end, you will have skill at repetition and rocking patterns, and some experience with how the music of a poem helps edit your thoughts. And don't worry. Even if the rhymes fall flat, the patterning will still hold you up. Just like your bones do.

Now, go



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