

Translator's Note

Icelandic is a precious language, in part because only around three hundred and fifty thousand people speak it at all. Iceland—an isolated island that was ruled by Denmark, Norway, and Sweden in turns for most of its history—is a basaltic time capsule for the language known as Old Norse, which has changed remarkably little in the island's 1,200-year history. Icelandic bears lineage in common with Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, and Faroese, but remains the closest to Old Norse—or simply *norrænt mál*, the northern language as it was once called—and is intelligible to most speakers of Icelandic. I have not tried to read Old Norse, but my Icelandic electrician once told me that I occasionally slip into an Icelandic that sounds, well, Viking, which I took to mean I have found home.

I met with Jennifer Baumgardner, founder and director of Dottir Press, in Reykjavík during July 2019, having completed two-thirds of a draft translation of *Quake* by Auður Jónsdóttir (*Stóri skjálfti*). Because she doesn't speak Icelandic, Jennifer still hadn't read the full book Dottir Press had agreed to publish. In truth, I was beginning to

glean that I did not understand the book yet myself—its spirit. I could decipher the words, but I had not discovered the language that would bring *Quake* to life in English.

Translation of literature consists of much more than meaning in a strict sense; it somehow births something that has a past, and teaches this reborn creature how to tell its story in another language. And then teaches it *again* how to tell it well. During this time of gestation, my friend Gunnhildur Jónatansdóttir would read the book with me, helping me to refine phrasings in Auður's floating, feral Icelandic that I didn't quite understand. We occasionally sat together while I translated, as if my frantic typing were a spectator sport for linguists.

In December 2020, almost a year into the pandemic, I worked in isolation from my fourth-floor apartment overlooking Faxaflói Bay and Esja, our mountain. Gunnhildur had moved away, but I completed my first full draft of the novel within a few weeks and began revising in February 2020, just as the earthquake swarm began in the south of Iceland. That swarm became significant to this translation. In Iceland, buildings are engineered to withstand seismic activity. When the ground beneath a structure shakes, as it does in an earthquake, the building sways as the energy of the quake rolls through it. On the top floor of a building, such as where I live, you feel the wave of energy acutely, like you are the tip of a wheat stalk. The movement itself was not frightening to me—it reminded me of an airplane during ascent—but its sound made me feel helpless.

The sound an earthquake makes is stratified. Teacups clinking in the cupboard, radiators rattling against cement

walls—these are the top notes. Beneath that: heavy furniture trembling on hardwood floors. And the base note: a sort of unidentifiable, unfolding thunder, like the lowest note of a cello or the vibrations of a tam-tam. These sounds, I later discovered, are captured in Páll Ragnar Pálsson’s symphonic rendering of the chief conceit in Auður’s *Quake*, just as they are now captured in my own.

It was in this state of constant quaking that I began to understand *Stóri skjálfti*, to feel compassion for the book and its spirit. Once I began my revision, I completed it very quickly, correcting dozens of clumsy errors made in the haste of inexperience and depression—but even as I sent the book (now ninety thousand words, as Icelandic tends to expand in English) to Jennifer, I knew it was still a rendition, not yet a living creature with a soul.

I decided I needed to spend time with Auður, to be “with” her and her text in the sense of Wallace Stevens’s “qualities of a poem”—“interesting / indigenous to a person / with / . . . contagious.” So I went looking for her. I sought her even when we were not together, working in the corridors of Kjarval. For instance, I discovered “fallandi konur,” a series of paintings by Helga Ástvaldsdóttir, when I was searching for the spirit of *Quake* during this last phase. Each work depicts a woman falling in a different position, different tones, and for a different reason. Grayish-nude skin contrasts with silver leaf; a parchment body is carried by deep ocean currents; and desire, a deep brown rust, drips down an inverted amber body. These

*From *Wallace Stevens: A Poet’s Growth*, by George S. Lensing

women seem to be expressions of a disturbance similar to the one Saga experiences in *Quake*, what she describes as “the anarchy of the body.” Alongside an intense and productive three months of revision with Jennifer, I spent a great deal of time with Auður. The joy of those two relationships was a necessary part of a third and final phase.

Right off the bat, Auður gave me permission to translate with my instincts, to make changes to the text, to assert myself as an author. She has maintained this throughout our relationship. “The translator is *always* an author,” she told me. And this text is very much changed. This English *Quake* is both mine and Auður’s, and we have been open with one another about this in a way that I have rarely experienced in my practice as a translator. As she puts it: “I have to trust you. It’s as if I’m a passenger in an airplane, and I have to let you land the plane.”

And although the text is considerably shorter, the changes themselves are, for the most part, not dramatic or material but stylistic. Icelandic as a literary language is much more permissive of, for example, the use of adverbs and adjectives to color in a scene. English uses a greater variety of verbs (I say this anecdotally) and can create action with fewer words. Auður’s voice is digressive in a way that is captivating, and rendering that fluidity—her Auðurisms—into English took a great deal of experimentation. Conversations and trains of thought were tightened to streamline the narrative in English, to pull the thread taut but not snap the fiber.

The final chapter of the English edition is, in fact, a composite of text that had been excised from earlier

chapters and the original ending, insights from neurologist Kári Stefánsson, and my own imaginative writing with Auður's guidance and her explicit permission and encouragement. In August 2021, as we looked through the near-final translation, Auður said, "One should always be translated by a poet." A generous thing to say, and my favorite Auðurism.

I want to thank her for sharing her voice with me. I would also like to thank my brilliant editor Jennifer Baumgardner, my aungvinkona Gunnhildur Jónatansdóttir, Vala Benediktsdóttir of Forlagið, and all of my kind reviewers and editors for their support and criticism. Finally, I'd like to thank my sister, Windy, for helping me to understand the brain and body.

—Meg Matich
Reykjavík, 2021