

Aria

ICELANDIC LANGUAGE

POEM OF THE WEEK

In an air-conditioned room you cannot understand the
Grammar of this language,
The whirring machine drowns out the soft vowels,
But you can hear these vowels in the mountain wind
And in heavy seas breaking over the hull of a small boat.
Old ladies can wind their long hair in this language
And can hum, and knit, and make pancakes.
But you cannot have a cocktail party in this language
And say witty things standing up with a drink in your hand.
You must sit down to speak this language,
It is so heavy you can't be polite or chatter in it.
For once you have begun a sentence, the whole course of
your life is laid out before you.

— *Bill Holm* (about the Icelandic language)

STRIP OF THE WEEK



ERIC WEINER ON ICELANDIC LANGUAGE

If it is possible for language, mere words, to nurture happiness, to tickle the creative soul of an entire people, then surely that language is Icelandic. Icelanders love their language. Love it even more than they love their country, which is saying something. For Icelanders, language is the tabernacle of the culture. That's what one person here told me. In any other country, I'd dismiss such a statement as nationalistic hyperbole. I might even laugh. Not in Iceland.

As any Icelander will tell you (and tell you and tell you), they speak the pure language of the Vikings, while other Scandinavian countries speak a bas-

tardized, diluted version. Like the French, Icelanders are fiercely protective of their native tongue. Unlike the French, Icelanders aren't sanctimonious about it. Everyone here speaks English as well as Icelandic. "Bilingualism" is not a dirty word.

The highest compliment any foreigner ever paid Iceland came when, in the nineteenth century, a Dane named Rasmus Christian Rask claimed he had learned Icelandic "in order to be able to think." When I heard that, it made me think—about the connection between language and happiness. Can language make us happy? Do words alone have the

power not only to describe our moods but to create them?

There is no denying that, for Icelanders at least, language is an immense source of joy. Everything wise and wonderful about this quirky little nation flows from its language. The formal Icelandic greeting is "*komdu sæll*," which translates literally as "come happy." When Icelanders part, they say "*vertu sæll*," "go happy." I like that one a lot. It's so much better than "take care" or "catch you later."