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Home and Homelessness in the Middle of Nowhere

In Iceland one must have a home; it is an offense not to—in some circumstances, a capital offense. A sturdy beggar was liable for full outlawry, which meant he could be killed with impunity.¹ The laws are hard on vagrants. Fornication with a beggar woman was unactionable;² it was lawful to castrate a vagabond, and he had no claim if he were injured or killed during the operation.³ One could take in beggars solely for the purpose of whipping them, nor was one to feed or shelter them at the Thing on pain of lesser outlawry.⁴ Their booths at the Thing could be knocked down, and if they happened to have any property with them, it could be taken from them without liability.⁵

How much of a homelessness problem there was we don't know. But there is a kind of panicky desperation that suffuses the laws that could indicate a fairly large population of unattached people, or merely that unattached masterless people were uncanny sources of contagion, disgust, loathing, and fear, divorced from their numbers. Beggars figure in the sagas too. Beggar women serve as transmitters of gossip, beggars are shown to be untrustworthy and are abused now and then,⁶ but no saga shows anyone outlawed for vagrancy, although of those outlawed for theft, a significant number were no doubt unattached to any household.⁷

The Icelandic legal regime, one might say, was obsessed with pinning every person down to an identifiable household. Everyone was obliged to

attach him- or herself to a household for a year term during a two-week period in spring known as Travel Days or Moving Days and one was also responsible for finding a domicile for one's dependants during that period if one could not maintain them on one's own.⁸ For most people home meant being in service in someone else's household. The law's requirement of having everyone formally fixed to a domicile was the first step needed to fix people into a grid of accountability. When most legal process required summoning the person against whom you had a claim, it meant you had to know where to find him, or where such summons could be uttered so that it was a legally valid summons. The head of household could find himself liable for the wrongs and misadventures of his household members; he was liable as well for their support for a period if they were too ill to work.⁹

In a society in which the main unit of economic activity coincided with the household, a domiciliary law was a labor law as well as a regulation underpinning a viable system of legal process and legal responsibility. The laws were greatly concerned with getting the maximum productivity out of the miserable volcanic soils in a short growing season. People who did not mow the grass and make hay, tenants who underproduced, were subject to prosecution for underexploiting their lands.¹⁰

The idea of home, of domicile at least, was lodged dead center in the Icelandic legal structure. Home was where lawsuits began—at the defendant's home, that is. Home of either plaintiff or defendant determined venue, in which court at what Thing the case was to be pleaded. And the end of a lawsuit for any serious claim that resulted in a conviction was deprivation of home, not just because you were to be killed as an outlaw, but also because your rights in your home were subject to confiscation by the man who got you outlawed. Outlawry also affected the rights of others, not outlawed, with regard to their own homes. If anyone took in an outlaw he too was punishable with lesser outlawry, which meant he had to leave home and Iceland for three years. Law-abiding citizens had the affirmative obligation to share with others in the district the responsibility of providing housing and maintenance to the outlaw's dependants.¹¹

But home in the sense of legal domicile could hardly have been a place where the heart was, surely not for those in service, though for the wealthier families the law embodies some special protection for the chief residence, the *aðalból*, which may have had some special emotional cachet for those possessed of one.¹² We would have to know just what a servant's legitimate expectations were of being retained for the next year before we could undertake to attribute to him much of a *feeling* of attachment to his legal domicile.¹³ The very name of Moving Days suggests relocation each

year for a significant portion of the population. One of the more insistent impressions one gets from the sagas is that people moved around a lot, via service and, among the wealthier segments, via fosterage. If there were fond memories of childhood, those memories would likely include several places, each populated by different people, with only some of the places also housing one's parents and siblings.

Then, too, one must wonder whether people's attitudes towards home vary, strange as it may sound, with the durability of the house, the actual building that qualifies as home. In Iceland, much to the chagrin of the archaeologist, houses were built of sod; they took a lot of maintenance not to melt away. A house made of stone, or brick, as that wise pig of the nursery tale knew, allowed one to bond to the house simply because it endured. Does this mean the Icelanders focused their attachment less to an actual building than to a particular view from a place, or to particular more enduring artifacts within the sod house? Does a sense of home intensify with fixity of place? We might construct a continuum of a sense of home with one extreme requiring a permanent attachment to an enduring building, with certain fixed visual sight lines looking out on what we call views, moving by degrees all the way down to the hunter-gatherer, or slash and burn agriculturist, or the nomad's tents and hollows in the ground. The servant might have had expectations of home more in approximation with a hunter-gatherer than he did with the head of his household for the year.

Then again the Icelanders never let themselves forget that they were new to the land; Norway never ceased to be part of the story of what home meant. Indeed they even figured some of their direction terms with reference to Norway. Thus their terms for southwest/southeast and northwest/northeast assumed one was positioned on the coast of Norway with land to the east and sea to the west. When they left Norway for Iceland they said they were going out or away; when they went from Iceland to Norway they said they were going "from out" or going back. They never ceased to see themselves as at the periphery with the center located a long way east across the North Atlantic.

But nonetheless, roots started to penetrate the lava on which they dwelt as they came to understand themselves as special for their remoteness, a people living in the middle of nowhere, without a king, and who were better poets and storytellers than anyone else in the Germanic north (or for that matter in the romance south). Home included Norway in a vague way, much as first-generation immigrants to America might speak of the old country, but in a complex way, for Norway was what they had to define themselves against to come to think of themselves as Icelanders. (This is

not unlike the experience of English and Spanish settlers in the New World who, however, had a local hostile population to contend with that aided them in their sense of separateness from the ancestral homeland by giving them a present danger against which to redefine themselves.) Norway was the home of their ancestors, a place that the most enterprising of them sought to visit, and a place where there was a king to grant favors and prestige, a symbolic capital that was transportable to Iceland. There is more than a suggestion in the sagas that there was a reverse migration to Norway. In any event, back to the ancestral lands to the east was where they expected people sent packing by virtue of lesser outlawry or some arbitrated imposition of exile would sail off to.

But I want to get at sentiments if I can and this is tricky for it will force us to deal with outlaws and exiles, those people, in other words, most likely to know what home is because they are conscious that they miss it and even worse, miss it because it was taken away from them. Home for those who can take it for granted needn't inspire all that much thought, talk, or self-consciousness. Take it away or threaten to take it away and people might of a sudden construct a theory of home out of their misery. Privileging outcasts has its own problems. They exaggerate and invent remembered joys, joys which they only came to understand were joys once they were missed. Did the Anglo-Saxon narrators known as the Wanderer and the Seafarer really have all that much fun in the ring-giving ceremonies as in their present lamentable state they believe they did? Very likely, it was the pitfalls hidden in those joys which probably earned them their exiles, for receiving rings from your lord is only pleasurable if you are getting more or better rings than the man on the bench next to you. Otherwise envy and vengefulness are your lot in the hall and that can lead to ale-assisted brawls and manslaughter of one's bench mates or angry thoughts directed toward one's lord.

That leads me to the dead and ghosts, for a brief detour. The dead are exiles too, outcasts of a sort and even outlaws. The Norse dead cared about the homes they once owned, and if they were just household members and not homeowners they still showed a great attachment to the personal property they left behind in the place they resided, or even to the place itself.¹⁴ They want to remain where they lived with what they owned. No one cares more about place and property than the dead; that is why they, along with dragons, guard hoards and cairns. Given the very proprietary interests of Norse ghosts it should not be surprising to learn that Norse ghosts were not really ghosts at all. They were the living dead, characterized not by airy spirit but by the grossest matter and tons of it. Icelandic

ghosts get heavy in death; they gain weight. Oxen flounder trying to drag them away. They seem to become the very earth itself merging with their sod home—their heaviness becoming paradoxically the way they make their spiritual claim to domicile—and claim a powerful deadhand control over the property they enjoyed in life.

These afterwalkers let us glimpse the dark side of the love of home and place. Take the case of Killer-Hrapp. He was very hard to deal with alive, aggressive towards his neighbors, acquisitive, bullying. On his deathbed he instructed his wife to bury him upright at the threshold of the living-room door, “so I can watch over my house even more carefully.”¹⁵ Not even his heirs thrive in the place after his death. His son goes mad and dies and when his widow’s kin try to claim the property it seems Hrapp is responsible for capsizing their boat and drowning them all. And he was not laid to rest until he was dug up, still undecayed, and cremated. Now dispersed to the winds, Hrapp couldn’t pull himself together to trouble anyone anymore, although his lands still seemed cursed by an uncanniness that Hrapp imparted to them.¹⁶

Hrapp’s love of his home, his property, is exclusive, a jealous love. To love his home means to let no one else share it or claim an interest in it. It means begrudging one’s heirs their fortune in his death, and it surely means excluding his enemies. Hrapp is an emblem of what property lawyers have come to call the right to exclude. We have come to think of home in dewy-eyed ways of a warm hearth with a stringed musical accompaniment, with images of friendly inclusiveness, but as is the case with most all our syrupy visions, they are bought at the price of those cast out or not invited in. For it to be *our* home means it absolutely cannot be everyone’s home. The number of people included in these touching scenes is always limited and even then the scene often includes one or two we wished weren’t part of the package. Hrapp’s conception of home is an aggressive sense of his own right to exclude; he thus wishes to be ever present when those he includes come onto or into the property, as well as to be there should anyone come onto it uninvited. Hrapp’s love of home reveals itself as a spitefulness and hostility to the pleasures he fears others might be having at his expense, much in the manner that some of us may be suspicious of the incentives that buying life insurance has for generating ambivalence in our loved ones at our final parting.

Living Icelanders worried about the attachment of the dead to their domiciles. When the vaguely werewolfian Skallagrim dies sitting upright, his son Egil is urgently called by very anxious household members to deal with the corpse. Egil takes no chances. He approaches the corpse indirectly,

closes its eyes and nostrils, and then cuts a hole in the south wall, no great matter in a house made of sod, and takes his father some distance away to bury him on a headland.¹⁷ No one was taking chances with Skallagrim by carrying him out across the threshold.

Elsewhere ghosts reluctant to leave their abode are summoned to a door court, the door, like the threshold, representing a magical boundary between inside and outside. The afterwalkers abide by the judgment of the court and leave.¹⁸ Folklorists have detailed the many ways of laying ghosts, which mostly involve confusing the corpse's sense of direction or bodily organization. Thus heads are severed and placed at the anus, catching the dead in the bondage of eternal recurrence in a Moebius strip.¹⁹ Others are cremated and tossed to the winds, some are buried at places of inherent ambiguity because unowned or unownable: crossroads, the shore between the high- and low-tide marks, divides between valleys. Do not, manifestly, do not bury an integral corpse at the threshold or carry it out that way if you think that might teach it the way back or be construed by it as an invitation to return, even if you bury it at a crossroads.

So I have with grim intent made home sweet home, the attachment to domicile, first a matter of law and second a matter of sentiment, the sentiments being love of place, property, and one's own, and grudgingness, spite, and malice with regard to anyone else who might enjoy the same at your expense, which, by definition, means begrudging your heirs more than your enemies. The love of place seems nearly incapable of existing without engendering as necessary by-products the darker passions of acquisition, possession, and desires to retain and control.

Let us return to the living. A man named Gunnar has been ordered to leave Iceland for three years pursuant to an arbitrated settlement. Gunnar had killed many people, none without cause; in fact he had an untraversable plea of self-defense for each of the men he killed, but it was judged that peace stood a better chance if he were forced to leave for a while. When it comes time to ride down to the ship, Gunnar says his farewells and announces that he does not expect to return ever again. But on his way to the ship his horse stumbles. Gunnar manages to jump off and land on his feet, but while floating in the air, described by the sagawriter cinematographically before that was technologically possible, as if in slow-motion, Gunnar looks back up towards the slopes of his farm: "the slopes are beautiful; never have they seemed to me as beautiful before, golden fields, new mown hay—I am riding back home; I am never leaving."²⁰ Plop, then he hits the ground.

Put aside the rare mention of natural beauty—it is not man’s relation to nature that interests me here, but his relation to his property, his home, and how that comes to appear to him when ordered to leave it. Remember Gunnar has announced he is leaving home for good, not just three years. There is an aura of doom about him. It has been prophesied that if he kills twice within the same nuclear family and then breaks any settlement made consequent on that killing, he will himself be killed. Gunnar defies augury, but not without giving reasons for doing so. His reasons do not sound in legality: that the settlement was unjust, that he had an unanswerable defense, and that why should it be he that has to leave rather than the people who attacked him. When the settlement was announced the saga notes in a typically understated way that “Gunnar said he had no intention of breaking the settlement.”²¹ His reasons are that his reason is overborne by the attraction of his home and the beauty of his own.

Some would see that he also thinks of his beautiful and difficult wife now that he is leaving her; that her beauty helps color the beauty of the slopes. Indeed the word for slope figures frequently in poetic kennings for woman. But the passage says nothing about her and though she is happy when Gunnar returns, there is no indication that we are to read that happiness as anything more than another instance of her delight in violating norms of proper behavior.²² To the extent that Hallgerd is part of the attraction it is because the new mown hay and the beauty of the property confer luster on her, not the other way around. It is the farm that is feminized, drawing Gunnar to it in a manner more wistful, more loving, more erotically styled, than the overly belligerent manner of Hrapp’s attraction to his own property. But Gunnar, though substantially more lethal than Hrapp, is distinctly less uncanny in spite of being given to singing verses from his grave.

There is another connection between Hrapp’s love of home and Gunnar’s and it is intimately tied up with the pain of thinking others may delight at your expense. When Gunnar announces his intention to stay, his brother, who has been ordered abroad too, tries to convince him to honor the settlement. Settlement breaking is shameful, he says, something he could never bring himself to do and something he cannot believe that his honorable brother would ever consider: “Don’t give your enemies the joy of breaking the settlement; no one would expect it of you.” Old Icelandic has a single compound for the pleasure enemies feel at your expense—*óvinafagnaðr*—literally, “enemies’ joy,” which is nothing more than Schadenfreude seen through the eyes of its unfortunate object, rather than the

perspective of the delighted subject. How did English ever manage without these words?

Like Hrapp, Gunnar's love of home cannot divorce itself from an emotional and moral economy in which giving pleasure to others or, more precisely, denying them pleasure, figures prominently in attachment to place. And though Gunnar's brother thinks that the *Schadenfreude* will all be the enemies', it is not quite clear that he hasn't stumbled upon an important component of Gunnar's motivation for staying. Hallgerd, his wife, senses it; hence her joy. Gunnar is back to rain mayhem on his enemies rather than letting them experience the satisfaction of his departure. His attachment to home means sticking it to his enemies. There is some textual support for this once the dead Gunnar speaks verses from his grave. The verse makes it clear (to the extent Norse verse makes anything clear) that he means to bring pain to his enemies. The allure of his fields and new mown hay was as martial a vision as it was bucolic; it was also a vision of mowing down men.

Avenging himself on his enemies makes home look like home sweet home to Gunnar. Thoughts of vengeance, however, do nothing to improve the allure of home for Gunnar's brother Kolskegg, who seems to have an equal share in the property. "No, I won't stay," says Kolskegg, "I shall not shamefully break faith with this settlement nor any other trust I have undertaken. This will be the only thing that will separate us. Tell my kinsmen and my mother that I don't intend to see Iceland again, because I will hear of your death, brother, and then nothing will ever draw me back." So strong is the norm against settlement breaking that even the pull of avenging a much beloved brother will not bring him back. It is more: by staying Gunnar pollutes home for Kolskegg, making it a place of shame. Home will be the place where he will either feel the desire to avenge his brother but be legally disabled from taking it because of his brother's shameful act (not that that need prevent him from taking revenge) or not feel the desire and feel shame for that.²³

But Kolskegg, in this passage, is still arguing, trying to convince Gunnar to relent. He knows no other way to make his point stronger about the seriousness of Gunnar's violation than to announce he will give up home, Iceland, and kin, give up on avenging his brother because his brother will have forfeited the right to be avenged. The passage is really quite moving because of what claims Kolskegg feels he must abandon, but then a sidekick's claims are limited precisely by being a sidekick's claims. A sidekick is less complex, and even if complex he understands himself to be secondary so that his complexities must remain unexplored or deferred; he is to

be a foil for Gunnar. He is there to show, by giving up his own home, how egregiously tragic Gunnar's choice not to leave home for three years is. Home then has a different hold on heroes and sidekicks, even honorable brotherly sidekicks. For sidekicks the fields are not as golden, the slopes not as lovely, even though Kolskegg's legal share in the property is no less than Gunnar's.

Gunnar stays to be declared an outlaw. That deprives him of his right to his home and to the benefit of hospitality in other people's homes. Home in any form is just what is not allowed him. Outlawry (is in fact a death sentence, but death is at the end of the causal chain the punishment contemplates. First it is about banishment from *heim(r)* in all its senses. The Norse word for world and euphemisms for death partake of the symbolism of home, abode, place, and space. Home is the place of the living in general (*heim*, adverb, is home *heimr*, noun, the world). To be born is *koma í heiminn*. To die is to leave this home. To lie unconscious is to be between *Hel* and *heim*. Outlawry means to deprive one of *heim* in all its senses, literal and pregnant. Its main style is to deny home and hospitality, to deny culture, the warmth of human habitation. The outlaw is thus the lone-wolf, the woods-stalker, the person who, along with the uncanny creatures of the dead and monster world, belong *utangarðs*, outside the pale.

The division of space into the social and the wild, *innangarðs* and *utangarðs*, is marked conceptually by the fence, *garðr*, that surrounds the home field. (Others have treated this in detail so I will be very cursory.)²⁴ The dividing line between within and without, though fairly sharp, still allows for gray zones, a transition zone. There are ambiguous spaces at the marches between in and out, hither and yon. The court of confiscation for an outlaw, for instance, must be held, *utangarðs* within "arrow-shot's helgi" of the fence where there is "neither field nor meadow."²⁵ The space of an arrow shot is a kind of consecrated zone between here and there, in and out, to which the society's legal process still runs. More haunting is the notion of the dog's bark, specifically, of being beyond it.²⁶ Man piggybacks on animal sensory acumen in matters of hearing and smelling to bring some kind of light to the dark beyond. Not so that that beyond gets made safer, but so that one has more time to defend against assaults originating from the world beyond. If the arrowshot is the space from which outlaws are launched into the wild, the dog's bark is the space that defends against the wild's launches into socially colonized space.

Gunnar goes back to his home and is killed there within months. His life as an outlaw is short. But two of the best-known sagas tell the stories of two men who lived desperate lives as outlaws for years. One of these

men, Grettir, has something of the uncanny about him. His strength is so prodigious that it pits him against afterwalkers, mound-dwellers, she-trolls, with all of whom he shares a certain kinship. (His literary and folkloric kinship to another uncanny soul, Beowulf, has long been noted.) Grettir was never much at home in the social world; he is barely socialized, refuses to work, insults people without cause, itches for fights and confrontation. His one socially valuable function is his ability to neutralize other uncanny sorts: he is very good at killing or putting to rest berserks, monsters, and the unquiet dead. He never was much attached to home, at least while his father was alive, though his mother coddled him, nor was he given to much reflection. But he is afraid of the dark and it is to the dark that he is expelled. The fear of the dark, more than the dark itself, is the emblem of all that which lies beyond the circle humans have managed to carve out from threatening chaos.

Gisli fits better among men. Except for a few homicides he is mostly a good citizen; he worked hard and was very good at building things, primarily homes. He built what was to become his sister's, his own, and his wife's once he was on the lam, in addition to several hiding places. Grettir, however, seems to break up houses or burn them up, often through no fault of his own, but either by accident or by the necessary consequence of fighting ghosts within them. If Grettir was meant to live amidst uncanny creatures, Gisli is very much of this world, though ill-fated, and bizarrely obsessed with his sister's sexuality. But once outlawed, Gisli comes to have a strange relation with the dark too. He suffers in his sleep. He is tormented by dream women who prophesy his ending. So what do outlaws' dreams and fears of the dark have to do with home? This will take me on what appears to be a frolic and a detour but which will strive to connect the idea of deprivation of home with self-awareness, psychological sophistication, and the rise of self-consciousness, not as in Lacan or Freud, but as seen through thirteenth-century Icelandic eyes.

It is via outlawry, the perfected condition of homelessness, of being allowed neither quarter nor sustenance, with all convivial company denied, that produces one's awareness as a purely individuated person. Psychological depth seems to come with enforced sociological shallowness. It is psychological inner spaces that now fill the void occasioned by the deprivation of the social *innangarðs*. Exile to *utangarðs* creates psychological *innangarðs*. And those inner spaces are terrifying, not like the warm insides of the farmhouse, which in *Gísli saga*, however, reveal them to be roiling with illicit erotic and murderous desires. The dark that Grettir fears is the darkness of his own consciousness of himself as utterly unattached and forcibly

excluded. And though Gisli was quite a dreamer of ill dreams before he was outlawed, those dreams prophesied doom for others; once outlawed, his dreams become self-referential. The outlaw is condemned to a kind of complete freedom by being denied the freedom of making any bonds at all. He is his own man banished into an awareness of himself as a pure and perfectly detached individual. No wonder the outlaws of the sagas become heroes; they are even lonelier than the most elevated hero who still plays his role within the bounds of society. The bums and tramps begging from farm to farm are just bums and tramps, but outlaws are, if not the Marcel Prousts and Underground Men of the glacial outback, at least the Hamlets and Miltonic Satans.

People always suspected that the risk of too much home was a kind of childish idiocy. In Old Norse the word for foolish is *heimskr*. There are proverbs to that effect: *heimskt er heimalit barn*: the home-bred child is an idiot. The proverb backs wholeheartedly the institution of fosterage, as well as travel, especially in the form of Viking raiding. In getting away from home lies the prospect of the wisdom that comes from seeing the world, the word for wisdom being, uncannily, *heimr* (world, home), so that a philosopher is *heimspekingr*, wise in the ways of the world or if we give *heim* its sense of foolish maybe the philosopher is just a foolish wise guy, as he is still contemptibly seen to this day: an educated fool. The wisdom that outlawry thrusts on Grettir and Gisli is not of the world as home—that world is lost to them; they know nothing of it except that they miss it. In its place they come to understand the notion of *missing*; they delve their inner spaces; fight with inner demons, desires and longing. I suppose some will be inclined to make this a matter of loss and lack in its Lacanian sense. But I find that a tediously dull way to gloss over the differences between then and now, even though Gisli, if not Grettir, can tempt one to go that way, what with Gisli's barely unconscious desire to kill anyone who sleeps with his sister, including her husband.

Gisli and Grettir experience their outlawry differently in a way that parallels their relations with others during their civil life. Gisli is very attached to his wife and she to him. Gisli builds her a house on a bleak unpopulated fjord, the kind of place, had it been further inland, that Grettir haunted. They do not have children, but they have a foster daughter both are attached to. In his last years Gisli spends much time in caves near his loved ones, but the little sociality he is granted by the loyalty and dedication of the two women who sustain him is funded proportionally by their own loss of social contact. None of them have a proper home so that Gisli might have some kind of home on the lam.

Grettir passes much time with otherworldly beings, occasionally helping people on the civil side by ridding them of ghosts and also getting helped on occasion by powerful men sympathetic to his plight. He has sexual liaisons with women and begets, it is thought, at least one child, but he never marries. He too dwells in caves, but spends his last year on an island, a plateau with sheer cliffs that plunge into the sea. A more poignant image of a home that is not one could not be found. But he is not alone there. His younger brother joins him, as well as a tramp, the very image of homelessness within the pale, contrasting with the outlaw's homelessness beyond it. Grettir is kin to both, one by blood, the other by convergence of their legal and economic conditions. But the bum is not given an inner life because he had nothing to miss in the first place. He had no belongings to no longer belong to, and so he merely whines and complains. He feels creature discomforts but attributes no meaning to them. So reprehensible is he that he ends up sharing most of the blame for Grettir's capture, murder, and mutilation. There is no honor in merely being homeless.

It is always a feature of papers and talks devoted to a specific conference or colloquium topic that one makes a little too much of the topic that provides the occasion for the occasion, seeing everything through the eyes of home and homelessness and twisting things into its orbit that have no business there. I may be engaged in a kind of conventional overreaching when I seek to make too much of the domain occupied by the Norse word *heimr*. Though I should be suspicious of linking home and homelessness with conceptions of world, worldly wisdom, foolishness, outlawry, self-consciousness, legal domiciles, lack, loss, and even sexuality, I will nonetheless continue in that vein. But I suspect I might have been able to find just as many connections had the topic been cisterns or elbows. So with that caveat admitted and ignored we have yet another concept to add to the mix which will bring together again Gunnar's violation of a settlement, ideas of outlawry, and the strictly legal notion of domicile as it is formally determined during Moving Days. The concept is *gríð*. It means home, with the particular sense of being the place in which one is lodged or in service in accordance with the law. It has, in other words, a formalistic and legal ring to it. Thus a servant is a *gríðmaðr* (serving man) or *gríðkona* (serving woman). To leave service is to *fara ór gríði*; to be homeless is to be *gríðlaus*.²⁷ But to my delight, because it affirms certain connections I have been making up to now, *gríð* also means, in the plural, truce or formal peace. It is thus the word for quarter, asylum, sanctuary. It even comes to mean life itself, as that which you gain when granted quarter. *Gríð*, in all its senses, is

exactly what is denied to the outlaw. To be an outlaw is to be without peace or sanctuary; the outlaw is thus *gríðalauss* (plural), literally without peace, and *gríðlauss* (singular), without home. To be a truce-breaker is to be a *gríðníðingr*, one of the worst things anyone can be called and it is what Kolskegg hints that Gunnar will be known as. Thus when Kolskegg says to Gunnar that he will not violate this settlement or any other trust he has undertaken, the word he uses that I have rendered as “shamefully break faith” is *níðask* sharing a root with *níðingr*, that is to be the lowest of the low, a betrayer of trust.

To be legally domiciled is to be accepted within the peace and hospitality of the household, not to be legally domiciled is to subject oneself to being outside the peace of all households for it is an actionable offense not to be in the peace of some household. Nothing seemed to horrify the Icelandic sensibility more than the idea of unattached people. People traveling alone were everywhere objects of suspicion. They were outlaws or people who were up to no good precisely because they were people who could kill or steal anonymously and thus evade the responsibility of making themselves available for reprisal. Solitary people were wolves, without regard to the slander implied against those most social of animals. If the predominant feeling for the homeless among us is disgust and occasional pity, the predominant one among them was fear and suspicion.

The stranger, however, probably had more grounds for being frightened by all those domiciled locals than they did of him. He could ask for a limited *gríð*, a peace or sanctuary of specific ambit and duration. He, by this gesture, was asking to be treated as a guest rather than as an enemy, both concepts—guest and enemy—inhering in the notion of stranger and captured etymologically in the common Indo-European root of the words *guest* and *hostile* (compare Latin *hostis*, *hospes*). Such truces were on occasion formally pronounced and in their anathemas there is a theory of *heimr*, encompassing both its narrow sense as a domicile and its broader sense of habitable world, the human world. The person who violates the *gríð* granted to the stranger is to be called a *gríðníðingr* and he is himself to be estranged,

exiled and banished from God and good men, from the heavenly kingdom and from all saints and never to be fit for the company of men and driven from everywhere as a wolf where Christians go to church, heathens sacrifice, where fire burns, the earth grows, the baby cries for its mother, the mother bears a son, where fires are kindled, ships sail, shields flash, the sun shines, the snow drifts, the Lapp skis, the fir tree

grows, where the falcon flies the springlong day and the good wind holds both wings aloft, where the heavens turn, the land is settled, and where the wind carries the water to the sea, where men sow seed . . .²⁸

It goes on but the point is fairly clear. The truce-breaker is to be denied human home; he has passed over to the other side. Home in its widest sense is where sociable humans venture as part of their normal activities; it includes the domain of animals that do not inspire midnight horrors or that do not play leading roles in bad dreams. If home cannot accommodate the wolf or the bat, it welcomes the falcon gliding languorously in its lethal beauty. Thus too the lethal beauty of armament as in flashing shields. Snow is domesticated too as it must be in the northlands; though it is not quite clear whether it is snow that is made tame by the skis of those uncanny Lapps, or whether it is rather Lapps who are tamed and brought in from the other side by the fact that they ski, just as a normal human would.²⁹ The non-judgmental inclusion of heathens in the same homely world with Christians bespeaks a pre-Christian origin for the text. Christians were not as willing to be as inclusive in their definitions of what belonged on the human side of the line; Christians had a nasty habit of morphing non-Christians into wolves and vipers.

Home, as is implicit in the anathema, is a relative term and an oppositional one. To the Icelander in Norway, home is Iceland. To the Icelander in Byzantium home is the domain of the *dansk tunga*, the Scandinavian language. In Iceland home narrows its focus to various specific places, not necessarily, given the moral claims of fosterage and service, to a specific place. But then these places will be opposed to other farms that manifestly are not home, but are home to others whom abroad you would recognize as Icelanders from back home. When I am abroad home is the United States. But when asked to particularize which state I come from, I am faced with certain ambiguities in the notion of home. I have lived for almost twenty years in Michigan, but though tenured and happy I feel vaguely transient. I am not rooted there. I grew up in Wisconsin and my parents still live in the house I grew up in. That still feels as much like my home as the home in Michigan. Home seems ineffably, for us, tied to the richness of childhood. And so my sense of homeness of the Michigan residence is really the vicarious experience of my children's experience of feeling at home there. For them Ann Arbor is home and to their minds it must be mine also because it is their home, and indeed their view is controlling. Home is an emotional thing. Being held to have a home at place X because the government says that is your home, or, as in Iceland, because you are

in formal *gríð* there, does not mean that that is where the heart is, or all of the heart in any event, for in Iceland especially, what with all that moving around, you were also attached affectively to other homes where you spent time or were cast in other roles. The idea and sentiment of home is temporal as well as spatial.³⁰

In immigrant communities or in newly settled frontier regions the idea of home, as noted earlier, is further confused. When the first settlers came out they no doubt felt themselves Norwegians; their new dwellings would be home as against other settlers, but still would not quite be home in other conceptual settings. A deep sense of home might require the time necessary for these Icelanders to think of themselves as Icelanders and not just as dislocated Norwegians. When does the sense of ethnicity emerge? It is clearly there in spades by the time the sagas are written, which can be seen en masse as the most glorious claim of a proud and separate identity as there can be. In the sagas we also have one of the clearest markers of ethnicity: the ethnic joke. To the Icelanders, Norwegians are drunkards; Swedes are pagans, berserks, and rapists. And in turn the Norwegians think of Icelanders as a bunch of suet eaters and country bumpkins. There is nothing better for marking off ethnicity within the bounds of a common linguistic community than differences in diet, so that one finds the other disgusting for eating and drinking disgusting things. Different foods, more than different landscapes, make difference felt, because the idea of eating the inedible fixes difference saliently in a suffusion of nausea. Different landscapes have no such effect.

But clearly, as Kirsten Hastrup³¹ has argued about Icelandic identity, the Icelanders' sense of themselves as Icelanders, and the concomitant sense of Iceland as home, was already in place at least a hundred years earlier than the time of the writing of the sagas. We have a self-conscious manifesto of Icelandic identity describing the society's birth, baptism, and confirmation: Ari Thorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* appearing nearly contemporaneously with the penning of the Icelandic laws in 1117. I would claim one could find earlier signs. The Icelanders knew that they didn't quite fit. Who else had no king? And within Christendom who else had their tithes computed not as an income tax but as a net-worth tax? They paid a property tax of 1 percent rather than an income tax of 10 percent, proof, by the way, that the expected yield on an asset was 10 percent. They were a people apart, way out in the middle of nowhere, as if outlawed themselves.³² (We can drop the "as if" in the Australian and Pitcairn Island story of identity formation.) In fact, the story the Icelanders liked to tell about the settlement was that many of the people who settled the land had

been outlawed for resisting the claims of overlordship of Harald Finehair. The Icelanders, like Australians later, built a new society far beyond the sea, beyond the known extent of middle-earth, and came there to build homes and eventually to see the place as home, but first they may have seen it as an exile to the wastes.

The sense of home works in two directions: from the bottom up. First build your house so that it is your home as against other homes. These other homes are characterized by relations that establish their otherness; these are thus the homes against which you feud, but from which you take your spouses and with whom you exchange feasts. And then groups of households get together and form a legal community which defines itself as against those it extrudes—the outlaws, the homeless, those who are *óalanda*, *óferjanda*, *órúðanda*, that is, not to be given food, a lift, or counsel—and finally as against those on the outside who want to take you over, like the Norwegian king.³³ Extrusion is the dark side of the process of active group formation. And from the top down: as when you are told to get out and go elsewhere, and if that “you” comprises a big enough group your elsewhere will make of the fens and wastes to which you have been exiled, an Iceland, an Australia, or an America, my new found land.

Home is uncanny in German, the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich* converge.³⁴ There is something uncanny both about home and about those who have none. Let me close with this: When raiding abroad Vikings would kill the infants of those people they plundered, tossing them up and catching them on their spears. When at home one did not treat one’s enemies so. Their children, at least until they reached the age of being an acceptable vengeance target, were spared, or if not it was considered an egregious violation of the norms of feud. Yet right at home one could kill one’s own infants, just as if they were Slavs, because in fact they were treated as creatures from beyond until brought into the pale, into the law, into the house, by sprinkling with water. Home thus to the new infant in a world of infanticide can be for those first hours of life the most precarious of places to be, born into outlawry until actively let in.

Notes

1. The laws of early Iceland, dating from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, are collectively known as *Grágás* and are conventionally cited to the edition of Vilhjalmur Finsen, *Grágás* Ia and Ib, *Konungsbók* (1852), and *Grágás* II, *Staðarsbóls-*

bók (1879). *Konungsbók* has been excellently translated into English with relevant variant matter from *Staðarshólsbók* and other mss. by Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland*, 2 vols. (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1980, 2000). For the relevant provision on killing sturdy beggars see *Grágás* Ia 139–40. There seems to have been an intermediate class of person, who was not attached to a single household nor yet quite a vagrant, but allowed to travel among households as part of the poor relief system for handling the dependents of outlaws (Ia 113, 115). I cite sagas to their chapters, which are maintained across editions and translations.

2. *Gr* Ib 48, II 178. He was excused from paying for the assault only if he acknowledged it; should he deny it and it be proved against him he had to pay compensation. In any event he was obliged to maintain the woman during confinement should she conceive and was obligated to support the child.

3. *Gr* Ib 203, II 151.

4. *Gr* Ib 179, II 258.

5. *Gr* Ib 14, II 123.

6. *Gísla saga* chs. 28–29 shows beggars very anxious as to how ill they might be treated if suspected of wrongdoing.

7. We do see, however, poor people lodged in and transferred between district households; see, e.g., Olaf Hildisson in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* ch. 4.

8. *Gr* Ia 129. Any male of sixteen years could arrange his own residence; likewise a single woman of twenty.

9. *Gr* Ia 134. According to the laws the primary liability for servants belong to their kin, but as a general matter those people in service in a household often qualified as poor relations of the household head. I have discussed this all in detail elsewhere and mention it only to paint in a background for what is to follow; see my *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), chs. 4–5.

10. A landowner was constrained to rent his farm if he would not farm it himself (*Gr* Ib 92, II 461–462, 466) and a tenant was liable for a three-mark fine if he left any meadow unmowed and lesser outlawry if he failed to take up the tenancy by the seventh week of summer (Ib 136, II 499).

11. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking* 238, *Gr* Ia 94; Ia 86–87, 114–115.

12. *Aðalból* receives distinctly less special treatment than odal land received in Norway. In Iceland the *aðalból* receives some insulation from levying for debts, but not all that much; *Gr* Ib 78.

13. See, however, the case of Atli in *Njáls saga* (chs. 36–38) who asks to stay on for another year even though he is fairly certain that if he does it will cost him his life; he is devoted to the household and most of its members to him.

14. E.g., Thorgunna, *Eyrbyggja saga* chs. 51–52; Glám, *Grettis saga* chs. 32–35.

15. *Laxdæla saga* ch. 17.

16. Cremating doesn't always work. The ashes get ingested by grazing animals which then start to act like afterwalkers themselves; *Eyrbyggja saga* ch. 63.

17. *Egils saga* ch. 58.

18. *Eyrbyggja saga* ch. 55.

19. *Grettis saga* chs. 18, 35.

20. *Njáls saga* ch. 75.

21. *Ibid.*, ch. 74.

22. Contrast Gunnar's mother who was not happy to see him return, knowing that he was breaking a settlement to do so and no doubt figuring that his enemies would now unite with the law behind them to kill him.

23. Njál, Gunnar's friend, orchestrates a revenge for Gunnar, knowing that it is illegal but that public opinion will still support some kind of violent reaction on behalf of a man as great as Gunnar as long as it doesn't step on important toes (*ibid.*, ch. 78).

24. See among others Kirsten Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 140–151; John Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance among the Gods: Baldr in Scandinavian Mythology*, FF Communications, vol. 116, no. 262 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1997), 16–18.

25. *Gr Ia* 84.

26. *Gísla saga* ch. 3.

27. See Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance*, 131–132.

28. *Grettis saga* ch. 72.

29. Lapps figure everywhere in the sagas as sorcerers, magicians, shapechangers, a people not quite of this world.

30. The same problem of temporal identification causes trouble with pinning athletes to teams. Was Wayne Gretzky properly an Oiler, a King, a Blue, or a Ranger?

31. Kirsten Hastrup, "Establishing an Ethnicity: The Emergence of the 'Icelanders' in the Early Middle Ages," in *Semantic Anthropology*, ed. David Parkin, ASA Monographs 22 (London: Academic Press, 1982), 145–160.

32. I suspect the process of separation and ethnicization was aided by the practice of naming groups of people after the valley or peninsula or farm on which they dwelt. So there are thus the people of Myrar, the Thornessings, the Haukadalers, Vestfirðingar, and then within these areas new names arose based on smaller geographic units.

33. *Njáls saga* ch. 141. *Gr II* 359.

34. On the *heimlich* meaning itself and its opposite, see Freud's classic discussion "The 'Uncanny,'" *Standard Edition* 17:217–256.