THE ICELANDIC CANADIAN MAGAZINE

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On the Cover

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W.D. Valgardson

Editorial

by Tim Arnason

The North American Icelandic community celebrates our culture and heritage in many ways; none more than the Icelandic Festival of Manitoba—Islendingadagurinn which will present its 114th annual event on August 2, 3 and 4; 2003 in Gimli.

Islendingadagurinn is the second oldest continuous ethnic festival in North America. The first Icelandic festival was held in Milwaukee in 1874. The first Icelandic festival in Manitoba was held in Winnipeg in 1890; and was held there annually until 1931; and since 1932 has been held in Gimli. It is generally regarded as the pinnacle event in the North American Icelandic community.

Within a province that celebrates countless summer festivals, many of which have come and gone, it is worthwhile to pause and comment on why our festival is so successful and why it has stood the test of time. Why have we been able to flourish for so long? What sets us apart from so many other events? I would like to comment on what I see as some of the reasons that contribute to our success.

We are a cultural festival. While we offer entertainment to all ages, in a very accessible manner, our focus remains as a celebration of our culture and heritage. This commitment is articulated through our mandate which reads:

"To preserve and promote the Icelandic culture and to bring together people of Icelandic descent to celebrate the accomplishments of the Icelandic settlements in Canada"

We celebrate our culture in many ways within the Festival, all with the common thread of the cultural ties that exist with Iceland.

Our Fjallkona is perhaps the most important symbol of Icelandic heritage and culture. It is the power of our homeland that draws us together and the Fjallkona represents our ancestral home. She is the key part of our Traditional Program, and is featured not only at the Icelandic Festival of Manitoba, but at many other Icelandic Festivals throughout North America. This tradition has come full circle and Iceland has adopted the Fjallkona tradition for their Independence Day ceremonies. A young actress is selected to be the Fjallkona to recite poetry as part of the ceremonies and this in itself is symbolic of the benefit of the ties that exist between our countries.

Our Traditional Program has remained relatively unchanged throughout the history of the festival, unlike many other features of the festival that have changed with the times. This is by intent. Our program features the Fjallkona Address, Toasts to Canada and Iceland, greetings from various dignitaries as well as poetry readings, singing and story telling which are so much a part of our rich heritage.

Amma's Kitchen, Culture and Heritage Pavilion, Thingvellir Nyja Island, cultural music, drama and poetry presentations are all further examples of the focus on our culture. These events are offered every year.

We are also proud to offer many presentations from performers who travel here from Iceland and it is important to note that we are only able to do this with the tremendous help we receive from the Government of Iceland, as well as through the assistance of sponsoring bodies within Iceland who also recognize the importance of our cultural exchanges.

Glancing back to Islendingadagurinn 2002 will give very vibrant examples of the performers who came from Iceland and who added so much to our Festival.

- The passionate performances from Petur Eggert and Stefan Orn who presented Thorarinn Eldjarn's Play, *Voluspa – The Prophecy* – will long be remembered.
- The wonderful Saga Singers who presented Njal and Gunnar – A Viking Musical based on one of the best known Icelandic sagas, *The Burning of Njal.* We were spellbound as they guided us through the journey celebrating the spirit of the Viking Age
- The Harmonikufjelag Reykjavikur Orchestra delighted us with their lively performances during the Grand Parade as well as the main stage prior to the Traditional Program

We will continue to bring performers from Iceland to participate in our Festival. The charter flights direct to Winnipeg this year provide a greater opportunity for access and we look forward to a significant presence from our homeland in 2003.

The success of Islendingadagurinn is also largely attributable to the tireless work of so many volunteers.

It is no small task to put this festival together. It is a significant event, encompassing a number of days that is enjoyed by thousands of visitors. As so many of our events are free of charge, it is difficult to be precise with attendance figures but it has been mentioned at between 40,000 and 60,000 people.

The Icelandic Festival of Manitoba Committee is keenly aware of our obligation to present a quality event that is consistent with our mandate. It is important to note that the work that goes into this is voluntary. We enjoy a tremendous volunteer membership of close to 100 people with countless other volunteers that help to make the events happen. The organization is led by an Executive, Board of Directors and receives guidance and counsel from our own Althing Committee being made up of Past Presidents who maintain an active role. There are 45 sub committees who are responsible for various aspects of the Festival.

There are those who have asked why we do what we do. Why do we volunteer in this endeavour? Why do we spend the countless hours, on a volunteer basis, to put together such an event? The quick answer is that we do it because we love it. We do it because we are proud of our culture and we want to contribute in such a way that we can keep it vibrant. It is a work of passion.

Looking at the current membership of the Icelandic Festival of Manitoba Committee and looking at the history of this wonderful celebration, one will often see so many of the same surnames. Continuing one's family's involvement with the Festival is very common and is an indication of the strong "family" aspect. Please allow me to comment briefly on my immediate family's involvement.

When I think of the Festival, I think of family. I think of my Afi's (Vilhjalm Johan Arnason) involvement with the Festival and, in studying the history of the festival, I am proud of his involvement when it moved from Winnipeg to Gimli. I read and hear the stories of how proud he was of "his park". How he decorated the Gimli Park grounds in such a way that it was pristine for the Festival and how he ensured that our precious park pavilion would gleam for the various events held there.

My own recollection of Afi's involvement, and the magic of the Festival, centered on the eve of Islendingadagurinn. All the family would gather at my Uncle John and Aunt Lilja's house. There would be laughter, singing of Icelandic songs, storytelling, and delicious Icelandic food. We would all enjoy the fellowship of family. From young to old, we would all be there. At a point in the evening the Icelandic flag would be raised and more singing would follow. As a youngster, I knew there was something quite profound about this and I think I finally know what that is. The importance of our culture, the importance of our homeland. These are connections that cannot be severed.

My father, Bjorn Valdimar Arnason, carried on the tradition of service to this Festival. He has been an active member of the Festival Committee for over 40 years and served as President in 1970 and 1971. At the young age of 86, he remains an active member of the Festival, serving on

the Board of Directors, Althing and received the honour of Life Membership.

My mother, Kristin Arnason (nee Benson) was a strong supporter of the Festival and had the honour of serving as Fjallkona in 1973.

I am honoured to carry on my family's tradition of service to this Festival and, in a broader extent, to maintaining and encouraging our very vibrant Icelandic presence. It is a work of passion.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

W.D. Valgardson with Ian Wallace, the illustrator of Sarah and the People of Sand River.

William Dempsey Valgardson
Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada

by Nina Colwell

In June, 2002, the Royal Society of Canada issued a press release:

> The Royal Society of Canada, the Canadian Academy of the Sciences and Humanities, has elected 58 new Fellows.... Fellowship in the Royal Society of Canada is considered Canada's most prestigious academic accolade to which scholars and scientists aspire. These distinguished individuals have accomplished work of truly outstanding quality....They add enormous value to the extraordinary resource of talent and experience that constitutes the Society.

And so it was that on November 22, 2002, William Dempsey Valgardson, son of Dempsey and Rae Valgardson, and Professor of Writing at University of Victoria, stepped out of a taxi in front of Rideau Hall, where an aide protected him and his new suit with an umbrella and guided him through the door. He found himself in a huge room lined with paintings of former Canadian governors general, receiving instructions from Governor General Adrienne Clarkson's aide-de-camp. When their names were called they were to move forward and stand on the pink rose on the carpet in front of the Governor General. The inductees filed into the room where the guests were seated. The Governor General was announced. Everyone rose and sang "O Canada" and "God Save the Queen." One by one, their names were called; one by one the scientists and artists moved forward to stand on the pink rose and listen to accolades about their lifetime of accomplishments.

"I wondered what I was doing there," Bill told me. "But my turn came. I'd forgotten my belt on my bed at home, but my pants didn't fall down. I didn't trip over my own feet. I managed to shake hands with the Governor General, accept my scroll, turn it over to an aide, sign the book, and get back to my seat without mishap."

But the Fellows of the Royal Society had no doubt that he belonged with them that night. As they said:

"The writings of William D. Valgardson, Department of Writing, University of Victoria, explore the dramas, comedies, and dilemmas common to humanity, providing wise and compassionate insights into the lives of individuals and communities. In workshops and lectures, in university classrooms as well as at festivals and conferences, he has for many years been dedicated to the inspiration, education, and support of new writers, many of whom have acknowledged his importance to the early stages of their development. In both his academic work and his fiction he has been instrumental in introducing Canadians to the culture of Iceland and Icelandic Canadians, making him a sought after speaker at home and abroad."

The University of Victoria printed a poster outlining some of Bill's many accomplishments, with a picture of him holding some of his many publications (he wouldn't have been able to carry them all without the help of a wheelbarrow). The last lines read: "Valgardson's contribution to the creative arts has made Canadians laugh, cry and think. It has also introduced us to the warmth of Iceland and Icelandic Canadians."

The Icelandic-Canadian community was thrilled that their native son was being

recognized for his years of dedication to the English language, as a writer, a storyteller, and an educator. The next afternoon, the Icelandic Ambassador couple to Canada, Hjálmar W. Hannesson and Anna Birgis, held a party at the Icelandic Embassy in Bill's honour. The Icelandic-Canadian and Lögberg Heimskringla quickly published an article about him and Steinþór Guðbjartsson of Morganblaðið followed, with a story and full-colour photographs under the by-line "Author Bill Valgardson receives the highest recognition in Canada." On behalf of The Icelandic Canadian, I talked to him by e-mail and telephone at his home in Victoria.

Nina: Tell me about the career that brought you from Gimli Collegiate Institute to Rideau Hall.

Bill: I'm sitting here staring at the wall, remembering how I staggered from one degree to another. There was no plan. I went to university because the guys I was working with were going. I took courses because other people were taking them. I stumbled into our school inspector, John Menzies, on the street one day and got a teaching job. Decided if I was going to teach I should get the qualifications so I could make a better salary. Went to the Faculty of Education, then summer school, so I could get a B.Ed. Went to Iowa for a Master's more by accident than design. That's three degrees. Stumble, stumble, stumble. But I did develop a simple plan when I was twenty: "I want to be a writer." That was it. A no-frills plan. Everything else was a side issue.

W.D. Valgardson with his parents Dempsey and Rae at the docks in Sidney, British Columbia.

Nina: Why did you choose University of Winnipeg for your undergrad?

Bill: I was working in the warehouse for the United Grain Growers, along with a group of boys around my age. I was getting $30 a week for a 40-hour week and extra for working evenings. Plus we were given a daily meal ticket.

I got the summer job because my Uncle Hughie was the head of the mail office. On his say-so I got this job unloading stinking hot boxcars and stacking pig feed. Sometimes I worked in the mail room destroying old correspondence. I used to rip the stamps off the envelopes, and when I had enough I'd sell them to a stamp dealer.

The high school grades came out, and the other boys were all going to university. My grades were better than some of them and they said that I should go to university with them. It had never occurred to me. One of them, Jack Marsh, said he'd take me with him and show me how to enroll. So I called my folks, and to their credit, they stifled their shock, said "OK" and I went to University of Manitoba.

It wasn't a happy experience. U of M was small by today's standards, but I was lost. Harold Bjarnason, (now Dean of Agricultural and Food Sciences at U of M) was staying in residence at United College (now the University of Winnipeg). He suggested that I move there the next fall. That I did. In return, my grandmother found him a place to stay with a friend of hers.

Nina: I've heard you say that United was a good choice for you. How so?

Bill: United was a good choice because it was smaller. The classes were smaller.

No two hundred kids in a lecture hall. The profs knew you by name. It was easier to make friends. Also, United was known as a teaching college. There was a real effort on the part of the profs to teach well. Many of them were delightfully eccentric.

While at United I joined the Creative Writing Club. Prof. Hallstead and Dr. Swayze were in charge. They did a marvelous job of teaching us to discuss each other's work. They were encouraging and kind while being insightful. They made us think.

It would be hard to overemphasize the role the professors played in my life. Gordon Blake unravelled the mysteries of economics. David Owen despaired of my ever grasping the difference between truth and validity, but persevered, and I've used his course in logic all through my career. The English courses were like a series of miracles as I learned to see beyond the surface of stories. That's where I learned to love Hemingway and Maugham. Walter Young brought the Winnipeg strike alive. Also important were the events that occurred in the main hall. That's where I first saw ballet and attended live musical concerts with professional musicians.

Nina: What did it feel like to receive an honourary doctorate from University of Winnipeg?

Bill: In many ways, the honourary doctorate was the highlight of my life. I think that was because it was from my Alma Mater. There is something special about returning to one's undergraduate institution in triumph. Especially when you've been a C student.

Nina: And becoming a Fellow of the Royal Society? How did you react to that?

Bill: Stunned amazement when I received a letter saying I'd been elected and did I wish to accept. Never, in my wildest dreams, had it ever occurred to me that I'd be elected to a prestigious academic society. Even after teaching at the University of Victoria for 29 years, I feel like an interloper in the academic world. My self image is of a small town boy who learned to write stories about the people and places he knows and somehow lucked into a great job where they let him teach other people to write and pay him an astounding amount of money to do so. I keep waiting for someone to turn up at my office and say, "What are you doing here? Out, out!" That feeling among professors who come from working class backgrounds is quite common, I'm told.

Nina: You speak of your career as if you just fell into it, but of course that wasn't the case with the many honours you've received. You didn't receive an honourary doctorate from your Alma Mater by chance and your name wasn't randomly

chosen by the Royal Society. What do you tell your students who want to make their marks as writers?

Bill: Everything I tell my students would take a book, probably two.

First, it is all right to want success and to strive for it. It is all right to do one's best.

Second, attitude is more important than art or craft. No matter how much you know, attitude can defeat you – or help make you successful.

Third, becoming a writer is easy. All you have to do is write well and write a lot. The trick is to constantly practice one's craft so as to become a better and better writer and to find ways of increasing your productivity. I show my students how to do both. My reward comes with the published books my former students send me.

Fourth: Now is the time for success. Too many people, especially young people, see success as something for the future. They postpone success. There's no need to do so. I've just had an e-mail from a student who was in a second year workshop last year. She wrote a wonderful story. I recommended – nay, insisted – that she send it out. It's been accepted for publication.

Nina: You talked earlier about the influence of your professors at United College. But I've heard you speak of the influence of your ancestors as well. Could you tell the readers of the Icelandic-Canadian something about their impact, even those you never met, on your life as a writer and a person?

Bill: There's far too much to tell and, at the same time, far too little. Obviously, my grandmother, Blanche Bristow, who died long before I was born, but who wrote poetry, fiction, and plays, and had her own acting company, has passed on some writerly genes. The lifelong storytelling that has taken place around my parent's kitchen table has had a big impact. Both my father and mother are wonderful oral story tellers. It's not just my parents, of course. Gimli was a storytelling community. You could go from house to house all weekend, drinking coffee and listening to stories being told. People didn't think of it that way. They were simply talking with friends and relatives, but many of them were fine storytellers. Surprisingly, my Irish grandparents were not storytellers. My grandfather was too traumatized by four years in the trenches during WWI to talk about what happened and my grandmother too caught up in the struggle to make ends meet. As well, they were Protestant Irish and not part of the blarney and beer in the pub that goes with being Catholic Irish.

W.D. Valgardson, Heimar Hannesson and Governor General, Adrienne Clarkson at Rideau Hall.

On his website (Do look it up: http://www.finearts.uvic.ca/~wvalgard/), Bill says something that for me and many of us who love his work, reveals the reason for his great success:

This vibrant, passionate world of the Interlake of Manitoba, of varied cultures, histories, and languages, was the world into which I entered. It was a world of people who were distinct and easily identifiable. It contained all the characters, all the conflicts, all the local colour I needed for a lifetime of writing. My daily experience with farmers and fishermen, with trappers and storekeepers, plus the influence of the Icelandic sagas, made it clear that the lives of ordinary people were worthy of art. In school we studied Shakespeare. We read about kings and queens, about courtiers and nobles, but I knew no kings and queens, dallied at no court. I knew the dreams and tragedies of people who struggled against poverty, who cleared stones from their fields by hand, who risked their lives on Lake Winnipeg to feed their families. Economically and socially they may not have been members of the nobility, but they were noble. When they failed, their tragedies were every bit as great as those of the upper class.

And when they succeed, as has William Dempsey Valgardson, we are proud to say: Well done, good and noble native son.

PHOTO BY ASTRADUR EYSTEINSSON

Louise Jonasson with Icelandic artist Eirikur Smith, of Hafnarfjarðar, amidst the Island souvenir exhibition at Kjarvalsstaðir.

The Substance of Remembering
The paintings of G.N. Louise Jonasson

by Anne Brydon

Pú manst hvernig fór, pegar formöld var unnin
og fallinn var Surtur og goðheimur brunninn
og jörð okkar hrunin og himnarnir níu,
svo heimur og sól varð að gróa upp að nyju:
Það geymdist þó nokkuð, sem á varð ei unnið
af eldinum -- gulltöflur, pær höfðu ei brunnið.
Við sitjum hér, Kanada, í sumars píns hlynning
og sólvermdu grasi að álíka vinning;
Hver gulltafla er íslenzk endurminning.

You remember how it ended, when ancient times were defeated
and the giant Surtur was felled and the world of the gods burned,
and our world ruined and the nine heavens,
so the world and the sun had to grow anew:
Something remained however, which was not destroyed
by the fire -- golden tablets, they had not burned.
We are sitting here, Canada, in the warmth of your summer
and in the sun-warmed grass, with a similar reward;
Each golden tablet is an Icelandic memory.

- Stephan G. Stephansson (1902)

In this closing stanza of his *Speech in Verse for the Toast to Canada,* Stephan G. Stephansson dramatises emigration from Iceland to western Canada during the last quarter of the 19th century. He refers to the world's ongoing cycle of destruction and renewal at Ragnarök, when the old gods of Ásatrú battle their enemies and the established order is overturned. Golden tablets, symbols of rebirth, survive the fire. Memories of Iceland amongst those who depart their homeland are like those golden tablets, brought to the new world where they enter into the creation of new cultural expressions.[1]

The paintings by G.N. Louise Jonasson exhibited at Kjarvalsstaðir under the title *Island Souvenir* can be thought of as the return to Iceland of a few of those tablets. The exhibition is comprised of three separate works: *Island* (1989-97) consists of one painting divided into four parts; *Island Souvenir I - XX* (1997-2000) of five paintings, each divided into four parts; and *Banner with Lance* (1989-94). As the years spent in their creation attest, these works are the culmination of extensive thinking about artistic, intellectual, cultural, and existential questions. As both Louise Jonasson and Svavar Gestsson note in their remarks, these works have emerged from the artist's commitment to her practice. They are not attempts to illustrate her ethnicity, and the fact that imagery referring to her part-Icelandic heritage appears in them is the unintended consequence of creative processes directed elsewhere. Yet that imagery is undeniably present, for the first time rising from her imagination and into the oil-based pigments, the canvas, paper, and wood with which she has worked over the last fifteen years.

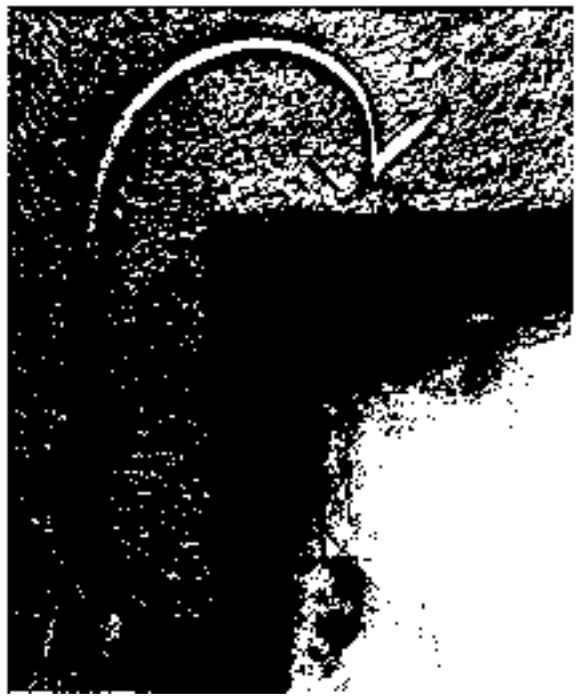
Taken together, the works in *Island Souvenir* suggest how a person might imagine their sense of location through history and culture. As personal rather than politi-

Island Souvenir I

cal explorations, they bring together and transmute a lifetime of influences and experiences into visual form. In this regard, Jonasson's art is comparable to the poetry of Stephan G. or the writings of Kristjana Gunnars, another Icelander more recently transplanted in Canada, whose novel *Substance of Forgetting* this essay's title invokes.

This link to literature I highlight intentionally. Part of Jonasson's inspiration comes through the printed word via a voracious, wide-ranging reading habit. She has worked for fifteen years as image editor and art director for the western Canadian literary journal *Prairie Fire*. I first got to know her not as an anthropologist who works in Iceland and with Icelandic-Canadians, but rather in my other role as writer about Canadian art: Louise edited my essay on the Winnipeg-based painter Eleanor Bond. That I should now, with this meditation on her work, have the opportunity to bring together these two streams of my life is itself a privilege. But there's more to it, since Winnipeg and Reykjavík are the two places that anchor me in the world even though my present fate prevents my living in either one. Thus the themes of displacement, loss, remembrance, and acceptance that permeate Jonasson's art resonate for me in personal as well as more broadly cultural ways. They reach beyond talk of immigrant histories to underscore the sporadic ruptures that in one way or another rent the fabric of our lives. As the art essayist John Berger comments, the opposite of love is separation, not hate.[2]

Jonasson writes of a phoenix rising from ashes and Stephan G. proposes golden tablets surviving Ragnarök. The coincidence of their metaphors is suggestive: true artists hungrily consume everything life offers them while their art creates meaning from the flames of that mental and material chaos. As if the incarnation of Stephan G.'s tablets, Jonasson's paintings evoke the form of the book (one senses the heft of large vellum manuscripts) but have also the palpability of stone slabs. Their three-



Island Souvenir II

dimensional quality produced by various actions, whether carving, scraping away or layering paint, makes these works cross into the realm of sculpture. In this subtle manner, their materiality tempts the viewer to touch them. At the same time, their sensual beauty and metaphorical richness touch something standing deeper in the soul.

In *Island Souvenir,* the artist explores a cross-cultural array of symbols and icons in order to effect reflection on the psychological and cultural processes of making meaning in the world while in the midst of experiencing it. The act of looking at the paintings exemplifies these processes. The mind tries to place the various images in relation to one another, but no narrative from the "real" world suggests itself. Yet they hint at something remembered, or perhaps familiar, as in déjà vu. Condensed, elegiac; concurrently material, metaphorical, and metaphysical: the paintings' logic is more like the poem, their intimacy that of the dream. Jonasson's artistry assumes about human thought what the dry language of cognitive science now acknowledges to be the case: namely, that "the mind is inherently embodied, thought is mostly unconscious, and abstract concepts are largely metaphorical."[3] The dream, the poem, the painting come closest to speaking a language of the body.

As landscapes of the imagination evoking Icelandic culture and history, the paintings of *Island Souvenir* portray what Jonasson has never seen except through photographs, books, and the fragmented images inherited from immigrant grandparents and passed to her through her father – to the memory of whom these paintings are dedicated. In this sense, they may be thought of as memories of memories, as well as meditations upon the actions of memory and forgetting, of time and how we dwell in it. They bear the melancholy of loss yet there's acceptance as well, a coming to terms with the past as it persists in the present.

In her name – Gilda Nadia Louise

Jonasson – the artist carries fragments of two histories, of Iceland and Ukraine. Her name interweaves the lives of those who quit old lands in an era of recurrent partings to voyage westward, seeking another future, or fleeing the past, or both at once. The names *Island* and *Island Souvenir* carry parallel traces that epitomize how cultures extend themselves into the world through their images and objects as well as through people themselves. An island is "at once a place of a fresh start, a clean slate, and a colony in which a resettlement of tradition is bound to occur."[4] Souvenirs are the things – mementos, photos, stories – which give material form to what the heart desires never to forget. These souvenirs acquire their own agency and transform as they enter the flow of various life journeys. In Icelandic, *Minning um eyu* evokes the image of an island—"Iceland within," as Svavar Gestsson calls it—carried in the mind's eye when the land itself has long been abandoned.

Origin of Naming

Unlike photographs that can freeze in time the appearance of a moment, paintings have the power to portray what is invisible to the eye yet nonetheless is sensed to exist. The paintings of *Island Souvenir* give visual form to the underlying structures of being, to metaphysical bedrock. When, in looking, I give myself over to them (savouring their rich, earthy hues and engraved surfaces, contemplating what images of wood, stone, metal, and water can recall), I slip into a state seemingly between waking and sleeping, where word and meaning are one, where reality takes on the quality of myth. John Berger calls this "the place of original naming," where a person contacts in the marrow of their being the ground of origin: the moment not of birth but of conception. All is innocent, timeless, and unparticular.[5]

In *Island,* the paint's application—the canvas is distressed, abraded, the pigment layered and the surface worked to grey and white—sensually renders the effects of weathering, as if little flakes of the island were eroding bit by bit. Both technique and appearance thus mimic the workings of time. Swaddled human figures form a marginal register, intimating the presence of others. Like guardians, like ghosts, like just-born babies wrapped in swaddling. Or maybe they are bundled up mummies, preserved for eternity. In a contrary move, they could also be new lives emerging from chrysalides. These deliberately ambiguous figures occupy a space where up and down have no reference, and temporality is uncertain. Do they surround the island and represent the "real" world of our senses? Or do they denote a timeless, invisible underpinning briefly rising into view?

In both *Island* and *Island Souvenir,* the tension between time and timelessness forms a dynamic motif that connects to the sense of contingency with which we inhabit the present. Elsewhere Berger writes that, until the general acceptance of Darwinian evolutionary theory over the last one hundred years, time had been experienced as "infiltrated by timelessness." A painting's stillness symbolized that timelessness, and provided one point of contact—along with "ritual, stories, and ethics" – between the profane world of time and the sacred substratum of the timeless and enduring.[6] Since technology and evolutionary thinking began to pervade our common sense, we have accepted as normal that change typifies existence, and that the forward movement of time rather than timelessness is the substance of the universe.

In contemporary art, this shift in cultural understanding manifests itself in the displacement of painting as the paramount art form. Further, the trajectory of painting and other media has been toward analytical thinking, emphasizing diagnosis and discovery over a concern with creation. Like Enlightenment philosophy in general, artistic inquiry delves into the mind more so than questions of being. This can favour the intellectual at the cost of the emotional, which at times appears to be the goal. Jonasson works in an older tradition of painting, still intellectual but thoughtful as well, one that concerns itself with the timeless and with deeper existential meanings. She turns the analytical bits into particular experiential metaphors by leaving them open to interpretation. Her visual technique allows for the music of chance to resonate between object and viewer.

Jonasson describes her artistic process as the reverse of archaeology and Freud's archaeological metaphor for probing memory: rather than digging through layers to find the origin, she reveals a deeper level at which meaning is organized, by building up layers of paint until the image emerges. She describes this process as akin to meditation, a dialogue between her and the initial marks she lays on canvas and board. There's no goal to represent something already known, but knowing comes through her relation with the materials. Only when the work is close to completion does she recognize the form that it has taken.

References to sciences that think time and conceptualise the past repeat within *Island Souvenir.* Geology, archaeology, genealogy, history, genetics, and psychoanalysis manifest as, for example, lava-like surfaces and stratified edges, or pre-modern artefacts like a carved stirrup and a sod house. In one way or another, these sciences show a contemporary concern with beginnings, with creations – of the earth, a society, a family, a persona. The first creation, of the universe, can also be read in the now-quartered island images, like gaseous clouds out of which matter formed. The search for beginnings posits the hope that there is something to which everything returns, a fundament or universal, perhaps even a guarantee of future redemption. It also suggests that time is knowable. Beginnings raise a conundrum, however, since one can't stop wondering, what came before time? The mind cannot think nothingness. The artist gives us one possible place of resolution, in the watery imagery surrounding each island. Water is a metaphor for creation as well as emotion, suggestive of cleansing and beginning again, but also of the amniotic fluid from which we all emerge. Here birth and the process of artistic creation flow together, suggesting that the particular – the birth of the individual – and the universal – the ongoing cycles of death and rebirth – bear a family resemblance.

Material Remains

Notions of objects and images moving through time and marking its passage follow naturally upon considerations of time and timelessness. The title word "souvenir" opens onto another grammar of Jonasson's art that explores ideas of transmission and communication, possession and loss. The English word "souvenir" derives from the French "memory" or "to remember," which derives in turn from the Latin "subvenire", to occur to the mind. According to Susan Stewart, the souvenir "speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing, for it is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia."[7] Possessing an object or memento is a way of remembering a place or person, and of retaining a bond or sensation despite separation. The souvenir is

the material remainder of an original experience, something physical a person can touch and gaze upon to recall what was felt to be desirable, authentic, and true. It works as a talisman against forgetting, embodying a refusal to allow a brief encounter to slip silently away.

The paintings of *Island Souvenir* can in this way be looked upon as mementos for recollecting, reworking, and transmitting personal, cultural, and visual pasts. The objects portrayed – things like rope, nets, wool and knitting, stone, wood planks, a stirrup, a manuscript, fish – share a down-to-earth materiality and give to the paintings an aura of deceptive simplicity, as if they illustrated a book of fables or legends. The lack of contemporary technology and the referral to historic ways of meeting practical needs evoke a peasant clumsiness that speaks to the real labour of existence.

It comes as no surprise to learn that one of Jonasson's earliest encounters with art came at an exhibition of paintings by Vincent van Gogh that opened in Winnipeg in December 1960. Van Gogh's and Jonasson's art share a deliberate primitiveness, as well as an intense, sumptuous palette as luminous as stained glass. In addition, both artists have created paintings to be experienced by their tactility as well as visually. Neither is it surprising that her child's hand surreptitiously reached up to touch those paintings' thick surfaces. Fanciful though it is, I imagine her fingers as the conduit for transmitting a desire to touch the world by means of a skin of paint.

Van Gogh and other artists such as Matisse and Cezanne of early 20th century modernism are not the only visual points of reference. Jonasson's visual sources multiply: like her reading habit, her visual habit is omnivorous. Pre-Renaissance art; medieval manuscripts; Brueghel's genre depictions of peasant life; textiles; Persian miniatures; artefacts and imagery from early history such as from ancient Egypt and the culture of the Scythians and Sarmatians who once inhabited what is now the Ukraine: these all influence the organization of the pictorial space, the working of surfaces, colours, and icons. In a sense, one can think of those original objects and images, whether tens or hundreds or thousands of years old, as souvenirs from elsewhere, fragments which Jonasson has collected and reworked, making them communicate other realities by mutating them into poetic metaphors and metaphysical proposals. The past thus remains alive – "nothing can take the past away: the past grows gradually around one, like a placenta for dying."[8]

In everyday speech, the term "souvenir" implies kitsch—a cheap, sentimental substitute for the real thing. Yet the word's etymology suggests that this is a recent denigration linked to the commodification of the desire to call to mind that afflicts us all. Jonasson's use of the term redeems it and suggests a broader sense in which an object or image can act as a material vector for transmitting the remains of other times and places. These vectors demonstrate, I would argue, the workings of an external, collective cognitive process—an intimation of how cultures remember. Her references to codes and languages such as DNA, hieroglyphs, runes, and American weather icons, as well as to the book and the ship, indicate a curiosity about the material forms that communication takes. That some of these codes have fallen into disuse or may do so in the future (what will happen to the book?) or their meanings are the esoteric knowledge of a few, suggests the fragility, mutability, and incompleteness of any act of communication or transmission.

Returning to Stewart's definition of the souvenir as feeding the appetites of nostalgia raises the denigration as well of the word "nostalgia." In North American usage, the term has come to refer to a romantic sentimentality that freezes the past and places it in the archives or curio cabinet. Nadia Seremetakis describes this cultural sense of "nostalgia" as precluding the past from "any capacity for social transformation in the present, preventing the present from establishing a dynamic perceptual relationship to its history."[9] She contrasts this to the term's original Greek meaning with its evocation of journeys and returns, of the maturation and ripening of a taste, and of a burning pain in soul and body. In Greek, nostalghía is "the desire or longing with burning pain to journey" wherein the past, as it is transformed in the present, attests to an "unreconciled historical experience."[10]

The imagery of *Island Souvenir* resonates with an aura of the primordial, the archetypal, the generically European. The paintings conjure nostalgia, but not for something that has ever been lived by the artist. The notion of "unreconciled historical experience" comes closer to describing memories of the memories belonging to others. On the map of the world, repeated like an invocation across the surface of *Banner with Lance,* Iceland is missing. It is an unsettling absence, even if it is one that Icelanders themselves have had to learn to tolerate. Maps are artefacts for locating one's self in the abstract geometry of latitude and longitude. But instead of location, this string of maps yields only a gap, a silence. This, then, is the memory, the souvenir – the reminder of loss at the centre of being.

Time of Consciousness

John Berger proposes that we live between two times, one of the body that is birthed, lives and dies, and the other the time of consciousness.[11] Our biology drives us inexorably toward death, while consciousness moves relentlessly amidst past, present, and future, making hesitant meanings and provisional stories.

We now live in an era of contingency, knowing that what exists at this moment can quickly disappear. In modernity, we have been directed to fragment experience and create separate realms for emotion and thought, body and mind, pleasure and pain. It is, amongst other things, a coping mechanism, a story we tell ourselves about ourselves. Nonetheless, beneath conscious thought, these rent pairs are experienced as alienated halves of a single entity—that is, of the self.

In contemporary art practice, explorations of the self and the problems of subjectivity in an indeterminate world without foundations are commonplace. Often they probe the wound of living, using visual imagery suggestive of pain, violence, and alienation. Edvard Munch's *The Scream* is the quintessential example, its potency now sadly spent by its commodified dissemination. Poignant examples abound, but at its worst, this genre of art does little more than pick at the sore with the tools of critical theory, diagnosing and describing an inability to come to terms with a most imperfect world.

Island Souvenir can be understood as exploring the self as well, but it probes no wound, displays no injury. Jonasson does not intellectualize upon selfhood as if it were an object removed from her own experience. She creates art from thoughtfulness, not theory. She has worked out her own, personal language to address the world, reclaiming its experience in the face of the loss at its core. The paintings can evoke a sense of melancholy but they do not induce in the viewer a chill; they are not fraught or depressive. Rather, they are mitigated by an acceptance that comes from the eventual recognition of the inevitability of death in life. Each icon is thus implicated in the paradox of identity. Her art does not propose any solution to that paradox but it does help with the suturing of the wound.

Of Forgetting and Desire

> "I am thinking home is where you choose to forget and choose to remember at the same time. Nothing hinders your choices. Nothing forces you to remember

and nothing forces you to forget. There is no reason to repress memory. There is no reason to hold it up against the daylight either."
- Kristjana Gunnars
The Substance of Forgetting[12]

The severing of the *Island* canvas into four quarters has an astute, organic feel to it. Behind the gesture one senses a larger meaning, and the mind tries to reassemble the pieces, to recognize the original image before it was torn asunder. What is it to recall something in its entirety when all that remains is a fragment, a trace, or a residue? What feat of imagination is needed to reassemble shards in order to recreate the original object and bring it back to life? Like archaeologists of the soul, we try piecing together stories about ourselves, using bits of memories reaching back to the time of childhood when the world felt electric with secrets. The recollected bits are eccentric and serendipitous, the remains of a child's active mind making sense of the perplexing adult world. Do we make memories, or do they make us?

Growing up, we identify facets of our personality as our uniqueness, to separate our personal identity from that of others. As adults, we examine what habits we have acquired – the foods we like, the books we read, and the desires we have – then speculate as to their origins. From where do they come? A recent visit with a beloved uncle made me wonder if I caught my own fascination for the North Atlantic from his attachment to that region he could so rarely visit except through his imagination. In parting, he gave me a well-thumbed book about Alfred the Great, King of Wessex. A small and loving gesture, his gift marks a lifetime of our connection that will not end with his death. I have taken him into my psyche, grafting his curiosity onto other of my influences, assuring its immortality even as it is transformed.

We used to speak of things bred in the bone—or in Icelandic, *eitthvað í blóð borið* – but our metaphor for what is felt as our abiding connection has now shifted to the molecular level. In one painting, Jonasson represents the popular version of the original model of the Watson-Crick double helix in replication. The new strands, referred to as daughters, Jonasson has chosen to sever so that they appear as a double X, the code used for describing females. Jonasson dedicates *Island Souvenir* to the memory of her father, Dr. Harold David Jonasson, who died in 1970 when he was 51 years of age and she sixteen. In her statement, the artist writes that she took unfinished paintings to her summer cottage, where memories of her father entered into the works' making. Knowing this, the relationship between father and daughter becomes a subtext for our own seeing, yet here we must tread with care. We might be tempted to think the sutures to be a reference to his medical practice, or diagnose the figure in the bottom right corner of *Banner with Lance* as a representation of her grief for the loss of her father.

If encoded references to her own life story were what these paintings contained, however, they would not resonate with the viewer as they, in fact, do. Another level of reading is in order. The spiralling strand of DNA is juxtaposed to seemingly disparate symbols and images, suggesting another grammar. Every mark, every figure, each fragment making up these paintings, speaks to the other, as if linked by an invisible genealogy.

One can interpret these metaphoric references in numerous ways. Given the context of this exhibition and Jonasson's Icelandic and Ukrainian pasts, the immigrant connection between Europe and the Canadian prairies comes to the fore. In this reading, the paintings suggest the working through of larger cultural forces that make possible a psychical possession of a strange environment. They explore how memories pass along lineages, of how cultures remember, of how other places are dreamed into being. The immigrant makes a new home in a strange world with bits of memory—photos, souvenirs, and other shards of another life. There is no line connecting this new land to the immigrant's ancestors. The dead are dead and gone; they are buried elsewhere. This is a loss that one can never retrieve.

The immigrant's child or grandchild has a paradoxical relation with the ancestor's homeland. Being an immigrant's child grants the liberty to pick and choose out of all that one has been told, and reassemble these bits and pieces into an "Iceland of the mind" or a "Ukraine of the mind." One can take a story and map it onto one's sense of self, in order to identify with it as the primal truth of self-authenticity. There is dreaminess to this imagining. It makes a mental space but it has no physicality. As a child, the first generation passes their longings to you. The child takes it in as exotic knowledge that is truer than anything. It becomes a mystery inside one's self. But as the child gets older, the questions start to come. Why, if the homeland was so wonderful, did people leave? There occurs then a loss of the idea of the homeland's reality: like a homunculus inside one's self, it never had a chance to be birthed. It remains a mythical landscape, a source of solace, a place that cannot be contaminated by actually living in it.

Svavar Gestsson refers to these paintings as European, unlike other art produced on the prairies. They seem to be messages from another place, speaking another language, telling of other worlds. Still, there's something of the prairie in Jonasson's art. It is the art of the periphery and of wide-open spaces. Living on the margins, at a distance from the major urban centres like Toronto or New York, grants freedom to imagine a fresh homeland and to respond to ancestral scripts in such a way as to transform and transplant them in a new

Louise with older brother Harold at the bottom of Pine, Boundary park (Winnipeg Beach), circa August 1957.

place.

The prairies are frequently likened to the ocean: the horizon is so distant and the sky so big that a person is constantly humbled by how large is the world and how small is humanity. In this sense, it is a little less strange that islanders would settle in the middle of a giant continent, even if the actual story of that settlement was more accidental and contingent than deliberately comparative. Sometimes I have thought of Winnipeg as an island on dry land (the urban equivalent of volcanic islands like Dyrhólaey or Pétursey in Iceland). Knowing that they are surrounded by distance and space has produced a sense of mutual reliance that is manifested in the city's vibrant artistic community. The parallel to Iceland's high level of participation in cultural creation is striking. Islanders know they must produce their own culture if there is to be anything to pass on through time.

Cultures must create their own clichés since this helps to unite enough to get things done, to make routines for living. The columnar basalt motif used in Hallgrímskirkja is a case in point, and Jonasson represents its edge against the radiant blue of a northern sky. Elsewhere a small, traditional Icelandic farmhouse is dwarfed by an open expanse of ground, suggesting both refuge and isolation. In the shops of Iceland one finds its form reproduced in miniature as a souvenir, and many, not quite so miniature, versions appear tucked into corners of urban gardens. Nostalgia for a sense of home, the miniaturization suggests a desire to possess its soothing certainty.

Home isn't a place; it's a state of mind in which threat has receded and satisfaction seems attainable. It is a place of comfort. The gamble for those who seek a fresh start is that a new sense of belonging may never be found. Not every house is a home, and not every country can feel like a homeland. To abandon home is to surrender one's self to the power of the unknown, to the unreal, to the whims of strangers. Meaning might come undone because home is its guarantor, forming the centre of the world. Such a connection is visible in Icelandic, in which *heim* (home) and *heimur* (world) bespeak a common origin.

The profound beauty of Jonasson's art is not its end purpose – these are not simple decorative works. Rather, their loveliness entices the viewer to linger and contemplate what archetypal figures suggest to be a substratum below the surface of everyday life. Using images drawn from geology, genetics, archaeology, and myth as metaphors for much slower accretions of time, the artist takes us to a place of constancy and continuance. In a modern world now overwhelmingly experienced as in flux, the sensing of deeper layers consciously or unconsciously lived connects us to what matters most. Reality requires creativity and imagination to make the events that envelop us coherent. Jonasson recognizes that life in modernity is fraught with journeys and departures, and that we struggle to make sense of codes and symbols, places and relationships with which we are only partially familiar. Our understandings are always incomplete, and possible meanings are sutured together just like the stitches the artist uses to mend a painting's surface, or to hold together the linen of *Banner with Lance*. We can experience this incompleteness as a perpetual sense of loss or displacement in the world or, as these paintings so poignantly suggest, we can learn to accept it as the substance, the tender beauty of our lives.

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my warmest thanks to Louise Jonasson for many things, not least the invitation to write about her work. Graham Asmundsson deserves credit for his considerable labours to co-ordinate all aspects of this exhibition. My thinking and writing about Louise's art have benefited from conversations with the artist, as well as with Kristine Hansen, Guðrún Ágústsdóttir, Svavar Gestsson, Ástráður Eysteinsson, Viðar Hreinsson, and Robert McKaskell.

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Friðjón Friðriksson

Letters from Friðjón Friðriksson

Translated by Sigurbjörg Stefansson

The following is a biography of Friðjón Friðriksson to introduce our readers to the man who has written a series of letters describing his immigration from Iceland to North America and the establishment of his home in Gimli, Manitoba. More than 30 letters will be printed in this continuing feature.

These letters were translated by Miss Sigurbjörg Stefansson, a well-known and respected school teacher from Gimli. A feature on Miss Stefansson will also be printed in a future issue of the *Icelandic Canadian Magazine.*

Friðjón Friðriksson was born August 21, 1849, at Holl, Melrakkasletta, Pingeyarsýsla, Iceland, of a sturdy, energetic farm family. As a young man he became engaged in trading, teaching, and acting as secretary to two district sheriffs in Iceland.

In 1873, when newly married, he left with the first large group of Icelandic emigrants to North America, some 165 people leaving August 5 on *"The Queen,"* which was also a cattle ship. *"The Manitoban"* conveyed them from Scotland to Quebec, where they arrived Aug. 20 – 25. Friðjón passed through Toronto to Muskoka, thence to Parry Sound, and soon after to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where he became an interpreter for a doctor. He knew some English when he left Iceland and soon became fluent in it, and he also spoke Danish. He did outdoor work for the doctor and kept his accounts as well. By spring he had secured work in a store for $7 a week, then considered good wages. In August he went to Toronto to work in a shoe factory, but moved in January 1875, to Kinmount, Ontario, to take over Sigtryggur Jonasson's store. He and his family accompanied the first group of settler who came to Gimli in October 1875. He assisted the government commissioner, John Taylor, in keeping the accounts of the government loan.

In the spring of 1876 Friðjón set up a trading business of his own. His combined house and store was erected immediately after the government warehouse, which was the first building in Gimli.

Although he had only $50 in savings, he had gained enough credit to lay in a stock worth some $2,000 to $3,000. In order to make payments he often had to make the 60-mile journey to Winnipeg on foot.

He bought two scows (flatboats) in Winnipeg, tore one apart and used the timber to reinforce the other, then sailed with all his merchandise to Gimli. Later he had a York boat constructed for his trading goods.

When the Dominion government sent surveyors in the fall of 1876 to survey and measure colony lands, and build roads, Friðriksson was appointed accountant and paymaster, paying the men half in money and half in goods from his store. Despite the extra cost of transportation, he maintained the same prices as in Selkirk, so his business prospered.

The quarantine imposed during the smallpox epidemic was left on so long that the settlers were faced with the prospect of starvation because they could not get supplies for the gardens and crops. When John Taylor went with the Steamer *"Mary Ellen"* to buy seed potatoes and vegetable seeds, he was told the quarantine had been applied and he was turned back. In desperation he went to ask help from Friðjón Friðriksson.

Friðjón replied that, at all costs, even if by trickery, a means had to be found to pass by the quarantine patrols at Netley, for it was every man's duty to save his own life. He had previously passed through the

quarantine at an emergency, had had his clothes completely disinfected, and had not since come into any contact with the disease. Now he set out on foot, depending on the news of the reimposition of the quarantine not yet having reached the land patrol, which proved to be the case. At Netley he found only two Native women who refused to convey him across the creek, until he threatened them with an invasion of the colonists. He summoned them in the name of the great Queen to ferry him across, which they did. In Winnipeg he bought some 300 bushels of seeds, and a sow which he named the "Metis." When they reached the quarantine line at dusk, the river patrol was so wrapped up in smoke to ward off mosquitoes that they did not recognize him, and he was allowed to pass.

Meantime Taylor and the Icelanders were anxiously waiting, for a policeman had been sent to arrest the man who, it was now rumoured, had broken the quarantine. However, Friðjón and the officer bypassed each other on the way, and Friðjón was met with a great reception. Thereafter it was generally rumoured outside the colony that there were two Friðjón Friðrikssons, one a reputable businessman, and the other a disreputable vagabond!

When the government of New Iceland was formed, Friðjón Friðriksson was elected vice-president of the colony, and later, president. He was also secretary of the meeting that framed the constitution of New Iceland. Besides, he was a member of the executive committee that founded the colony newspaper Framfari, and assisted with the school established at Gimli by the wife of Rev. Jon Bjarnason, Fru Lara Bjarnason. He was interpreter for Lord Dufferin on his visit to Gimli.

He was appointed first postmaster of the Gimli post office, the first official post office established by the Canadian government in New Iceland, December 1, 1877. He continued his business operations as well, and in 1879, in partnership with Sigtryggur Jonasson, he purchased the steamer *"Victoria,"* and set up a sawmill to produce lumber.

During the great exodus from the colony, when only 16 farmers remained in the Willow Point community, Friðjón moved in the spring of 1881 to the Icelandic River, to Sigtryggur Jonasson's former home, Moðruvellir, where he resided until the fall of 1884. Apparently he continued the post office there under the name of Gimli, which in 1886 was changed to the Icelandic River. He was influential that same year in having the post office at Gimli restored.

He left the Icelandic River in 1884, spending two years in Winnipeg and Selkirk. From 1886 to 1906, he lived in Glenboro, north of Argyle, where he maintained a successful general store business as well as several farms. In 1906 he retired to Winnipeg.

Friðjón was a member of the Glenboro school board for 17 years.

His wife, Guðny Sesselja Sigurðardóttir, and he were married the day before leaving Iceland. Two of their sons died in childhood; the other two, Kari and Haraldur, were 19 and 15 years of age in 1908. Their only daughter, Aurora, married Thomas H. Johnson, who was an attorney general of Manitoba.

The Friðrikssons maintained a charming, hospitable home. He is described as a peaceable, considerate, fair-minded man, characterized by gentle, good humour. He was fond of reading, as far as his busy life permitted, and maintained well his

Icelandic heritage, but became an excellent citizen of Canada.

- Taken from the Government of Canada website: www.collections.ic.gc.ca

Letter # 1 - To Jon Bjarnason
Toronto, Nov. 14, 1874

Most Honourable Friend:

I thank you very much for your letter which I received yesterday (it had been at the P. O. for four days). I was really glad to get your letter and to learn that your are well. I also appreciated your interest in our countrymen who have moved to this country. I only wish that we had more patriots, like yourself, among us, but unfortunately that is not the case, at all.

You asked me to tell you about the Icelanders in Canada, and I shall do my best to do so. Last August, 111 people moved from Iceland to Ontario, and in addition to these 14 more arrived, i.e. 125 in all. Of these (125) 23 people have moved to the States, but six have passed away, maybe more. According to this reckoning 96 - out of those who came last year - are here. In addition to this group one person has been here since the summer of 1872. In August of this year, a man with his wife and four children came here from the southern part of Iceland. The majority of these 103 Icelanders stay in Muskoka in Parry Sound, Rosseau and surroundings, and a few live here in Toronto. Only 2 or 3 farmers have broken land and built houses for themselves, but I don't know how successful their farming is. All others work as hired hands, some in saw mills, some in factories or have other odd jobs; most are farm hands. The Icelanders who came here in September of last year are 352, most of these came from counties of: Skagafjorður, Eyjafjorður, and Þingeyjar.

The State Government of Ontario asked Sigtryggur Jonasson from Skjaldarvik in Eyjafjar County (he had been here for two years) to meet these Icelanders at Quebec. He accompanied them to Toronto. A few bachelors were immediately engaged in digging ditches in the country and maids (or women servants) were assisted in finding jobs, but the majority of this group stayed for two weeks in Emigrant House. Then they were transferred to a small town, Kinmount, which is 120 miles northeast of here. Houses are being built in Kinmount in which the Icelanders will live during the winter. The Government is going to provide Icelanders with land in the vicinity of Kinmount and to give them steady jobs with the railroad. This railroad is to connect Lake Ontario to the Pacific Line, crossing the district where the Icelanders are supposed to live.

There are very few stores north there, making it difficult to get food and other necessities. In order to improve this situation, Sigtryggur Jonasson (along with a Canadian) established a business there - selling to the Icelanders everything that they need. I had correspondence with a fellow north there, bringing me a lot of unpleasant news.

At first housing was insufficient, the people became ill with stomach problems and other illnesses, and 20 died--mostly children and teenagers. The reason why this illness struck is probably poor housing

and dismal sanitary conditions--phenomena which have tended to be associated with the Icelanders. Now the health situation is improving. The land up north seems to be barren, but only a small part of it has been explored. Many are discontent; they think that the Government is failing to fulfil its promises about high salaries and good housing, but these accusations are mostly due to foolishness and avarice since the Government tries to do its best to make their (Icelanders) lives tolerable.

The Icelanders complain about not having a minister, and have a good reason to. It is absolutely awful that children's education is totally neglected. Recently I got a letter from Sigtryggur Jonasson concerning this matter. I hereby send it to you and ask you to give us some indication as to whether or not you would be willing to take this job. I know that this job will be more difficult than the average one in Iceland but, on the other hand, the need is so acute that it is hard to have to turn the job down. However, I advise you not to rush into this, at least not until we can be sure that Icelanders settle down here and form a community.

Concerning an "Icelandic Association" I shall do my best, but it is difficult for me to discuss the matter with the Icelanders because most of them live far away from me - out in the country. I am going to appoint several local agents to assist me in promoting the matter. However, I am not very optimistic about this association except maybe if we were to divide it into two bodies, each with its own board of directors, one of which would be located where the majority of Icelanders live. While the board of directors is located in the States, Icelanders in Canada can not attend meetings and therefore it is difficult for us to join. When I have brought this matter up to the Icelanders, I shall write to you and tell you about the results. Anyway I hope to be able to provide the list of names.

I and my wife are well. I have a neat (clean) and rather easy job in a shoe repair shop. It doesn't pay much, but I can manage, and I like it much better than in Milwaukee.

Pardon my rush in writing this letter which I send to you with the best wishes for you and your wife.

Yours,
Friðjon Fridriksson

--

Letter 2 - To Jon Bjarnason
Toronto, Dec. 29, 1874

Dear Friend:

Tonight I was honoured by a visit from Rev. Smithett of Lindsey and another minister from Kinmount. They came to find out what I had heard from you concerning the Icelandic ministry in Kinmount. Mr Smithett said that he had sent you information about what you can expect here - approximately a week ago - but he said that he had not received an answer yet. If you find it necessary to hire a school teacher to assist you, Mr Smithett thinks that that is not going to be problem. Please answer Mr Smithett as soon as possible, but do not rush into turning down any other job offer until you have an explicit promise of a permanent position and acceptable salaries here. If you find the job offer here acceptable I do hope that you will accept the job because it is urgent that this position be filled.

After the New Year I am going to send you the list of names of those Icelanders who are living here in Canada.

I thank you for the sermon which I received last night.

Yours,
Friðjón Friðriksson

--

Letter 3 - To Jon Bjarnason
Toronto, Jan. 8, 1875

Dear Friend, Happy New Year:

The widow's name - about whom you asked me - is Sigruður Gisladottir. She lived in Akureyri last year and she came from there with her three children: Thorsteinn Benediktsson, Benedikt Benediktsson and Ingibjorg Benediktsdottir. They are all grown up, intelligent and promising.

Thorsteinn is a carpenter by profes-

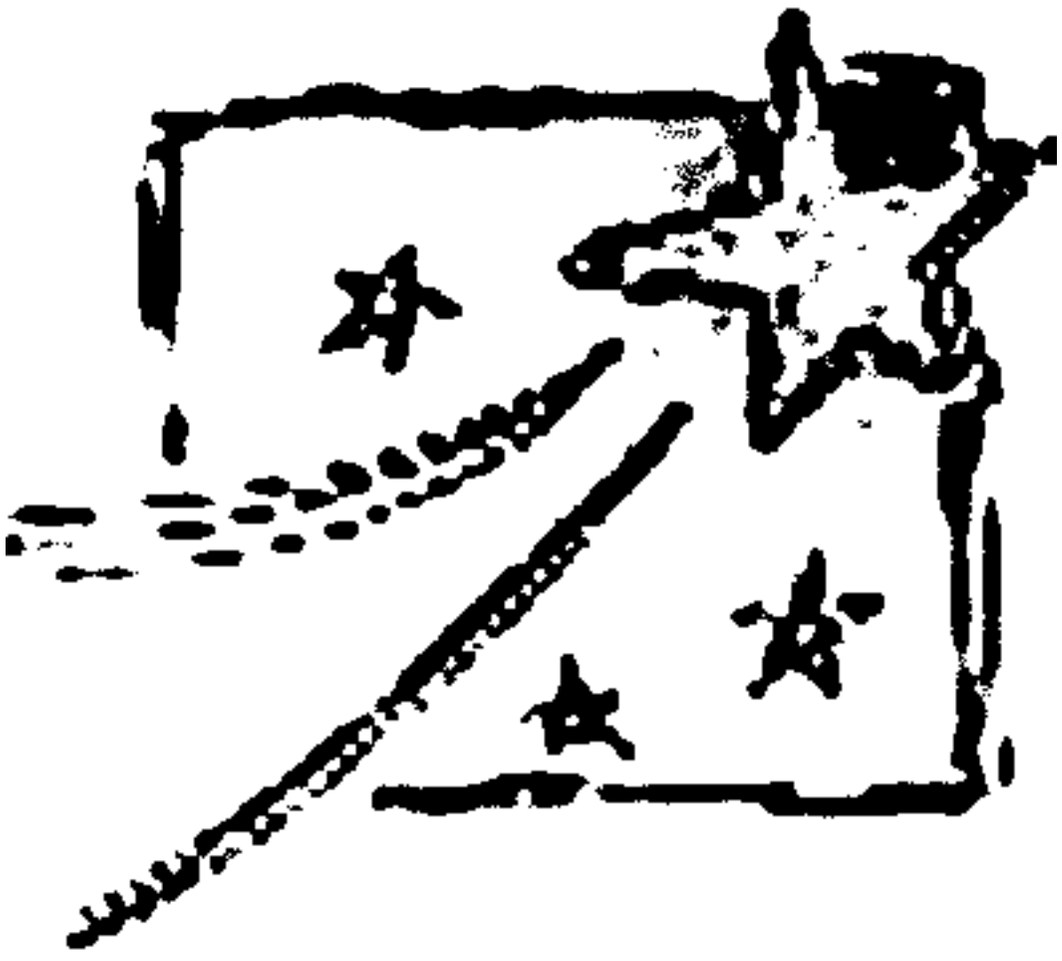
sion. He and his mother live here in Kinmount, and you can address their letters to the Post Office, but you had better point out that they are from Akureyri because they might have namesakes among the Icelanders. They are poor but not in debt, and look very neat and tidy. At first Thorsteinn worked for a merchant, but now is in roadbuilding. Benedikt is a farmhand, he is supposed to have 14 Canadian dollars a month. Ingibjorg worked as a maid (up north) for Canadians until this week - when she came south here to Toronto. I just took her to a place where she will work as a maid. She is to have 6-7 dollars a month. These people were friends of my father's in Iceland and - as a favour to him - I am glad to be able to assist them.

Yesterday, I got a letter from I. Olafsson proving what you had told me about him, praise the Lord.

I hope to be able to send you a report about Icelanders here, living and dead.

Best wishes from me and my wife to you and your wife.

Yours,
Friðjón Friðriksson



The Shooting Star

by David Jón Fuller

The night I saw a shooting star was the beginning of one of the greatest adventures of my childhood, and despite what you might think, Bird's Hill has enormous potential for such things when you are six years old. That's how old I was when my parents decided that Bray Road East was an appropriate place to raise us as healthy, stable young children. Trudeau was in charge of the country then, although at the time I still thought that the "Prime Minister" meant something religious, similar to the Pope. I suppose he did, too. I was not too impressed with our new home at first, as there were no movie theatres there; my chances of seeing Star Wars yet again had become rather slim.

I suppose my parents had not realized that my siblings and I had already become very much like what we were to be as adults. Brian, the oldest, had what might be described as a "superiority" complex. Lisa, next in line, always expected us to notice how beautiful she was. Tammi, third oldest, was quiet, and always seemed to be pondering the mind of God or figuring out how to build a nuclear bomb. As for me, I liked to wander around, watching people, and making up stories about them for myself and anyone else who would listen.

It was a cold, clear night in late fall when it happened. I remember looking up at the stars and wondering what God would have said if Abraham had actually been able to count them. I had asked my Sunday school teacher about that, but she said she didn't know. As I was watching the sky, I saw a shooting star. Then I noticed another... but it wasn't just passing by, it was getting closer! I was afraid that God was sending one of his angels to get me, so I ran back to the house to get my dad. He was in the kitchen, reading one of Tammi's Archie comics; I remember that clearly, because for an instant I wondered how Jughead would react to this crisis. Nearby, my mother was baking, and in the next room, Brian and Lisa were arguing over what TV show to watch.

I rushed in, but I barely had time to tell them about the star before it happened. My mother was scolding me for wearing my boots inside the house when there was an enormous crash from the field where I had just been. The whole house shook, and I think a vase broke. I was so scared that I lost control of my bodily functions. (I think Brian did, too, and that would have been some consolation, but he would never admit it.) I started babbling about the angel who was coming to get me, but everyone was rushing to the kitchen window, and they weren't listening to me, as usual. When everyone went outside, I quickly went upstairs to change my pants. By the time I got outside myself, my parents and Brian were carrying someone back to the house.

My father explained that a meteorite had landed in our field, and they had found the man nearby. He was tall, and hugely-built, and seemed to be very heavy; he was covered in scorch marks and dirt, and his hair and beard were singed. The impact of the crash must have caused the shooting star to explode, because the man had a piece of stone lodged in his head. He didn't look as if he would survive, but my mother said that they couldn't very well leave him out there, since it was already mid-November and the weather was quite cold.

Nobody knew who he was, and since he remained unconscious, we couldn't ask him any questions. My mother had him settled in the spare bedroom and then shooed everyone out, except me, because I was six and hid under the bed. After the lights had been turned off and the door shut, I emerged. There was no moon outside, but the light from the stars came in

through the window, so I was able to get a good look at him. He had bushy, bristly hair on his head, face, chest and arms; I thought he looked like Harry Monster from *"Sesame Street."* He had had two thick gloves on, which my mother had put on the dresser with his other clothes, which were covered with dirt. Although everyone looked big to me at that age, I could see that he was larger than normal, even larger than my father, because his feet poked out from under the sheets and hung over the end of the mattress. He didn't do very much except lie there and breathe, so I wasn't entirely disappointed when my mother discovered me in there and pulled me out by the ear.

The next morning, I woke up to discover that a blizzard had settled in overnight. My mother said the phone wasn't working, and I went outside to join my father in the field where they had found the man. There was a crater where the shooting star had struck, and I was fascinated. I asked him about it, and he explained that it wasn't really a star, it was a meteorite, which was a piece of rock from outer space. I was relieved to hear my father's explanation, because it seemed to undermine my previous theory of a vengeful archangel (as well explain where rocks come from). I asked him what had happened to the star, or rather meteorite, and he just said that he had put it in the shed. I, of course wanted to see it , but my father said that that was out of the question, because it might be radioactive. When I asked him what that meant, he said that if I got too near it I would have two-headed children. This, of course, only served as an incentive for me to get a sleeping bag and head for the shed, but my father reminded me of my chores and my plans were thwarted.

It was Friday, but we didn't have school because of an inservice in our division. I suspect that my siblings and I would have come down with mysterious maladies, which would have disappeared about an hour after the school bus came, had it not been a day off. Our strange guest had not yet regained consciousness, a condition which I was unable to verify myself; my mother never left the kitchen because she knew that the minute she did, we would all creep into the guest room, which was adjacent. My parents discussed what should be done about the man's head wound, and we all listened intently, except Brian, who seemed to want us to think that he knew more about skull fractures than the man on Quincy.

My father was no doctor, but he said that if he didn't always know what would save a man's life, he did know what would kill him, and a stone in the head was no good, especially if it was radioactive. (I hoped that the man was married so that I might be able to see how many heads his children had.) There was no way for us to contact a doctor, and what with the blizzard, it was doubtful whether anyone would be able to get to us anyway. My father argued that since the stone was not very big, it would probably be better to take it out than leave it in. I was unclear as to the advantages of having a large stone in one's head as opposed to a small one, but then Brian said that my head was just one big rock anyway, and since I felt I had to

dispute that point, I missed the rest of my parents' conversation.

Despite my mother's misgivings, my father went out to the garage to get a pair of tongs that our Uncle Bart (the blacksmith, not the accountant) had lent him but had never asked for back. At this, even Brian admitted some interest, but we were forbidden to enter the spare room with my father. While my mother boiled some water and my siblings complained, I quietly crept into the cupboard, which ran along the wall between the kitchen and the spare room. I had discovered a little peephole in the wall long before, when I was five, but there had never been anything interesting enough in either the guest room or the cupboard for me to use it before. I nestled in between the flour and the sink pipes to see what my father was going to do.

From what I could see, he approached the man hesitantly, holding the tongs. I suppose that pulling a stone out of someone's head was awkward from a social as well as an engineering point of view. My father grasped the stone with the tongs and braced his foot on either the bed or the man's face; I couldn't see which it was from where I sat, but I remember thinking at the time that the most logical place would be the man's head, because that was how I pulled nails out of two-by-fours with my hammer.

Well, my father was fairly strong, and he heaved for all he was worth. What happened next was somewhat confusing; the man gave a great shout, and I saw my father fly across the room. The dresser must have fallen over my peephole, because I couldn't see anything. I was so startled that I jumped back, knocking over the flour and pushing the cupboard door open. I emerged, covered in flour. I heard my father saying "Jesus Christ!" (more than once), and Brian yelled that he would get the twelve-gauge. The man was shouting in a language that I didn't understand, or else he just knew swears that I hadn't heard yet. When Lisa saw me, she shrieked, which scared me again, so I screamed, too. My mother had had quite enough of this by that point and when she yelled at us to be quiet, everyone listened. Even the man.

My mother proceeded quickly into the room as the rest of us hovered by the doorway. My father was getting up, holding the tongs, which still held the stone. My mother went directly to the man and pressed a steaming cloth against his head. He began to protest loudly, but she silenced him with a sharp, "Tut!" and proceeded with her work. He wasn't too thrilled about the peroxide, either, but he patiently endured my mother's ministrations, and when she was done, he looked much better.

The next thing was to wash him up. He seemed confused by our bathroom, so my mother ran a bath for him. She said that because of the blow to the head, he must have amnesia. That was a new word for me, and I thought she meant, "He must have magnesia," so I ran off to get some for him. When I returned, he was already having his bath and my mother said that I mustn't bother him. Just as I was wondering whether even our four-legged cast-iron bathtub would be big enough for him, he started singing. I didn't understand a word of it, and from the look on my mother's face, neither did she.

Everyone could hear him downstairs, and they were as mystified as we were. My father muttered that he was probably a patient from Selkirk who had gotten away. Before we could discuss his origins any further, the phone rang. It was one of the neighbours, calling to ask if we had seen anything odd the previous night. My father glanced to us for suggestions as to what he should say. My mother frowned and shook her head quickly, and I and my siblings unanimously agreed that we should keep the man to ourselves. My father feigned ignorance of any unusual goings-on, and when the neighbour persisted, he joked that perhaps he ought to be more careful with his next batch of cider.

The man came downstairs shortly, in my grandfather's old housecoat. It was far too small on him, but he didn't seem to mind. My mother made breakfast for him, and sent us all about our chores. I passed through the kitchen casually as often as I could, and I saw that wherever he came from, he sure was hungry; he consumed six eggs, five pieces of toast, ten flapjacks, four

cups of coffee and seven bowls of Cap'n Crunch (he even almost ate the prize). My mother was amazed, and I wondered if I would grow as big as he had if I could eat that much.

It had finally stopped snowing. Brian and I trooped outside to clear the driveway, and despite my mother's protests, the man followed us out in his bathrobe. Brian already had a shovel in hand, because it looked as if our father was having trouble getting our new investment, the snowblower, to work. The man seemed interested, and he rushed back into the house, returning shortly in his own clothing. My mother had washed it all (even polishing his boots), except for the gloves, which I had overheard her tell my father were as heavy as lead. He had a big wool sweater and a linen undershirt, as well as a large belt around his waist. He also had trousers and a warm wool cloak.

He strode through the snow towards Brian, who was about to start shovelling the driveway. Our driveway was about twenty metres long, and I have always felt that clearing all the snow off it ought to have been one of the Twelve Tasks of Hercules. Well, Brian was only too happy to let the man have the shovel, and our guest set right to work. My father, Brian, and I stared in dumbstruck amazement as he shovelled the entire driveway in just under five minutes. He was about to start on the road when my father called after him to stop. He was afraid that the man would overexert himself and faint, but it looked to me as if he had hardly worked up a sweat. So, seeing that the bandage around his head was still in place, my father let him have his way, and we went inside for some hot chocolate.

Over steaming mugs, we discussed the possible origins of the man. No-one knew what language it was that he spoke, but everyone had a theory. Brian thought he was from Quebec, because as far as he was concerned, anything that wasn't English had to be French, and therefore stupid. My mother thought he might be Ukrainian. She said that when she had commented on his sweater, he had seemed to mention something about having been in Gimli. Lisa said that he was probably a lonely castaway who had lost his memory (despite the fact that one doesn't see many castaways in the middle of the Prairies). Tammi murmured that perhaps the man had fallen out of the sky with the shooting star, a theory which I thought held some water, but my father quickly shushed her. He never let the conversation about our strange guest run to such wild flights of fancy, even in later years; I suspect he worried that if a rumour like that go out, we would be swarmed by reporters from the supermarket tabloids, such as the *"National Enquirer,"* the *"Daily Star,"* or worse, *"The Winnipeg Sun."*

At that point, the man returned, covered in snow and ready for lunch. We broke off our conversation and gaped in astonishment as he polished off five ham sandwiches, four bowls of soup, a chicken, three bags of tacos, two containers of potato salad, and a dozen ginger snaps. He still looked hungry, and my mother looked stressed. We discovered later that he had

cleared the road for about half a kilometre in either direction from our driveway.

My father found more work for him to do. He seemed disoriented, and confused by many things, but was happy to be busy. From time to time, I noticed him staring absently at the shed.

That evening, everyone had something to do except me, and the man. Tammi had Brownies, Lisa had dance lessons, Brian went out with one of his friends who had a driver's license, and my father left to return Uncle Bart's tongs. My mother was busy doing laundry, so I amused myself and the stranger by teaching him how to play checkers. We sat on the bed in the room that was now designated as his, and he made such an indent in the mattress that the checkerboard and I were always in jeopardy of falling towards him.

I had brought my mother's tape recorder in, too. It was not very good, as tape players were not common in those days, but I sometimes recorded stories I made up to play them back for myself or anyone else who would listen. It got me into trouble once, when I recorded over one of Brian's KISS tapes. He had been trying to throw me into the well when my mother noticed and stopped him in the nick of time. Afterwards, she secretly gave me a fifty-cent piece, so I can't honestly say that I regretted the mistake.

I was hoping to record the man speaking, but checkers of course is not exactly a noisy game, so I was not having much luck. I was also feeling a bit sick, because I had tried to eat as much as he had at dinner, but I had scarcely consumed a twentieth of what he had packed away. I wondered if it was eating such large quantities of food that made him so heavy.

We played checkers for awhile, but he seemed to lose interest after losing every game. I suggested doing a puzzle, and although I don't think he understood what I was talking about, he realized that it meant something other than checkers, so he agreed. I got off the bed and pointed towards the closet, because the puzzles were kept on the top shelf, which was too high for me to reach. The man got off the bed and opened the closet door.

He was immediately struck on the head by my father's bowling ball, which had been put up there and forgotten about. The man was stunned, and I quickly switched the tape recorder on, hoping he would start swearing again. I thought if I could capture his words on tape, I could play them for my Sunday School teacher, and perhaps ascertain whether or not it was heavenly speech. When he did, he accompanied his words with gestures, so I was better able to understand what he meant. This is how our conversation went

"Jæja... Hvað er þetta?"

"It's my Dad's bowling ball."

"Ha? ... Hvar er ég?"

"What?"

"Hvar er—Æ, þetta er vitlaust!" He paused, and looked out the window toward the shed. Then he laughed and said, "Jáá! Nú man ég!" and pulled me out the door with him. "Komdu!" he said, "Gráttu ekki, drengur!"

"Well, you're hurting my arm!" I said, because he was.

"Afsakið."

"Well, it's okay. But let me put my boots on first."

Once we were outside, he marched right up to the shed and tried to open the

door. However, my father had closed the padlock.

"Hvað er nú þetta?" he said, confused.

"It's locked," I said, "Only my dad has the key. We can't get in."

"Ha?" he said.

"We can't open the door, " I said, shaking my head. "It's locked." I pointed to the padlock.

He looked at me, and then back at the lock.

"það þýðir ekkert," he said. With that, he seized the padlock in one huge hand and ripped it off the door. I stared at him as he proceeded into the shed and returned gripping the meteorite in his great gloves. I remember being amazed that he didn't even have to turn green like the Incredible Hulk to do it. It was an odd shape (if there is an ordinary shape for a shooting star); it seemed to be made of a clay-coloured rock. When I got a closer look at it, I realized that it was not stone at all, it was something covered by clumps of earth, and stones. He lifted it up and smashed it down on the ground, and it fractured into a thousand fragments. I was too interested in what was inside it to speculate further on its composition. The man picked up the object that lay revealed and raised it joyously over his head with one hand. I remember wondering at the time whether he might be a carpenter, or a blacksmith like my Uncle Bart, because I had never seen such a large hammer.

"Mjölnir!" he cried.

"Is that your hammer?" I asked.

"það er nefnilega það."

"Who are you?"

"þór heiti ég."

"I'm Jamie."

"Blessaður," he said, extending his hand. I took it, and he clasped my arm so tightly that I thought it would break before he let it go. Then we returned to the driveway, where he banged his hammer on the ground three times and looked up to the sky. The stars were out, although there were some patches of blackness where some more clouds were rolling in. It wasn't long before we saw a shooting star. Unfortunately for my nerves, this one seemed to be getting closer, too, rocketing down out of the sky. I heard a distant rumbling noise, like thunder, and the star, or whatever it was, flashed like a sparkler as it approached. Soon I was able to discern a vehicle hurtling towards us out of the sky. It wasn't a plane, or a rocket, but a chariot, which was pulled by two huge rams and driven by a boy who was older than me. The noise grew louder as the chariot came nearer, and I saw lightning flashing about its humongous wheels. The boy parked in our driveway.

The man looked at me.

"Jamie, þetta er Pjalfi. Pjalfi, þetta er Jamie."

The boy smiled, but I didn't let him take my arm. The man jumped into the chariot.

"Nú verð ég að fara heim. Takk fyrir allt saman!"

"Goodbye, Thor," I said, waving.

He waved back and said, "Bless!"

With a crack of the reins, the two huge rams took off, nostrils steaming and hooves thundering. The chariot whisked away into the sky, rumbling and flashing all the way, until I couldn't see it anymore.

I went inside and found my mother in the basement, listening to *As It Happens* on the radio as the washer chugged and the dryer whirred in the background. I explained to her what had happened, but I don't think she was listening, because she didn't even react when I told her about the man breaking the padlock.

I was heeded no more later, when everyone had returned home and it was discovered that the man was gone. It had started snowing again, so the tracks from the chariot were all covered up. All in all, I don't think my mother was all that sorry to see him go, because even though he could certainly pull his weight when it came to chores, he probably would soon have eaten us out of house and home. I did manage to tell everyone that his name was Thor, and at that, my father said that he must have been from Selkirk, after all.

We kept the whole episode to ourselves, except for times when my mother had had too much to drink and started telling stories about Ukrainians who ate as much as alligators. I have always wondered about what exactly happened that night; where he had come from, where he was going to, and how everything turned out the way it did. I am glad that it happened, of course. It taught me at a very young age that there is a great deal about which we know nothing; that "there are more things in heaven and earth, than are dreamt of in our philosophy."

Thank you to our donors

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Your support in 2002
was much appreciated!

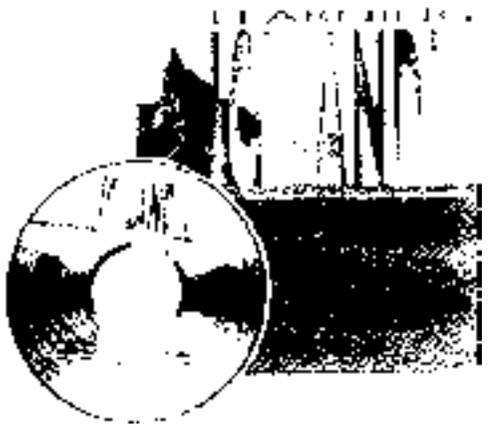
Poetry

A Dream

A dream is just a whisper of a forever running imagination.
A dream is like a candle,
The slighest breeze will forever turn it off,
Forever shatter it's delicate reminisce.
Sure life is set on that very thread of rules,
But we some day will walk across that thread.
That thread we walk on will turn into thick rope the farther we go.
But if we go far enough that thread,
That rope beneath your feet will turn to solid ground.
That ground will eventually lead you to that very dream,
That whisper.

- Sara Berg, age 13

Book Reviews



Learning Icelandic

By Auður Einarsdóttir, Guðrún Theódórsdóttir, María Garðarsdóttir and Sigríður Þorvaldsdóttir.
Mál og Menning
160 pages, $38 USD

Reviewed by Christina Sunley

Several years ago I took my first trip to Iceland, and found myself instantly enchanted by the language. My Icelandic-Canadian grandparents had both died before I was born, so this trip provided my first exposure to the language. Completely innocent of Icelandic's grammatical complexities, I gamely attempted to pick up words and phrases while talking with relatives during the course of the ten-day trip. My cousin Águsta encouraged me in my efforts. "You should come back next summer," she offered. "Live with us for a month, and take the Icelandic course for foreign students at the university."

I remember the moment well. We were standing by the salmon river that runs through Reykjavik; a light rain was falling, the grass was emerald green, and the sun in its northern magic was shining – despite the rain, despite the fact that it was just past 11 o'clock in the evening. I nodded enthusiastically; anything seemed possible. If a rainbow could appear at night, why couldn't I undertake the study of Icelandic?

There were many reasons, as it turned out. To begin with, I couldn't find a single Icelandic class offered in the entire San Francisco Bay Area. The materials I purchased for self study – and I think I've bought nearly everything that exists – rely either on overly simplistic, phrase-memorization methods, or present every rule of grammar (with its multiple exceptions) in mind-numbing detail. Other languages I'd studied (French, Danish, Spanish) had provided me with much quicker rewards – although I never achieved fluency, I was able to put together simple and reasonably correct sentences fairly quickly. At least in my case, Icelandic's complex inflectional system made such instant gratification nearly impossible. To make a long and discouraging story short, I abandoned my attempts after just a few months, convinced that even a minimal grasp of this difficult language was probably beyond my grasp.

Yet like all worthwhile dreams, this one refused to succumb to a premature death, and a few years later I found myself applying to the Sigurdur Nordal Institute's summer 2001 Icelandic program. Although I hoped to learn as much as I could before arriving, I knew better than to tackle the difficult grammar on my own, so I adopted the method of watching subtitled Icelandic films on video. (The best I discovered for this purpose was "Hrafninn Flygur," by Hrafn Gunnlaugsson; it's a wonderful film in its own right, and I found the Viking dialogue clear and easy to follow. I memorized practically the entire film, though I knew full well that phrases like "Die, traitor!" and "I'll cut you into pieces for Odin's crows!" were unlikely to come in handy on the streets of modern Reykjavik.)

And then, just two months before I was to leave for Iceland, I caught wind of a new language instruction book being published, called *Learning Icelandic.* I immediately ordered it by email from the university bookstore, and a few weeks later it arrived in my mailbox.

It is no exaggeration to say that *Learning Icelandic* was everything I'd been longing for in a beginning-level Icelandic self-study program. Co-authored by a team of university language instructors, *Learning Icelandic* consists of a 160-page text accompanied by a 65-minute audio CD. Although the book itself is a slender volume, it contains the most coherent and sensibly prepared introduction to the Icelandic language that I have encountered. *Learning Icelandic* is divided into three parts: 15 reading lessons, a glossary, and a detailed introduction to the grammar. The reading lessons contain a mixture of dialogues and exercises that are cross-referenced to the grammar section. For students unfamiliar with highly inflected languages, it provides a comprehensible, step-by-step guide to understanding how Icelandic nouns, articles, adjectives, pronouns, and numerals decline. The book's inventive graphic design enhances its clear presentation of concepts. Paradigms are laid out in an easy-to-see format, using whimsical illustrations to keep each page lively.

If *Learning Icelandic* consisted only of the book itself, the authors still would have made an important contribution to the field of Icelandic language instruction, but the exceptional quality of the accompanying CD makes this an absolutely outstanding offering. While the CD includes question and answer exercises as well as straightforward instruction on verb conjugation, numbers, seasons, telling time, etc., the majority of its 94 segments consist of dialogues, and it is these which bring the Icelandic language to life for the beginner. The CD begins with each of the main characters—an extended family whose members also appear in the book—providing short biographical introductions. We meet the grandparents, parents, and three children, plus an Italian exchange student who is living with the family and learning Icelandic. In addition to varying the monotony found on many language tapes, this realistic spectrum of gender, age, and speaking styles is extremely valuable for anyone wishing to converse with actual Icelanders. The dialogues build in speed and complexity over the course of the CD, providing the listener with steadily increasing challenges. The CD format makes it particularly easy to play and replay specific segments until you can differentiate the individual words, then practice running them together into natural sounding phrases.

For the next six weeks, I played the *Learning Icelandic* CD every chance I got – in the car, while washing dishes, even riding the exercycle at the gym – and always found it pleasurable listening. The voices are engaging and lively, and the situations all too realistic: a teenage girl and her ten-year-old brother squabbling over who gets to use the bathroom first; a five-year-old breathlessly counting the days of the week until her birthday; the entire family eating dinner together; a young journalist attempting to impress a beautiful actress he encounters at a bar; friends planning their vacations; and many more.

Nothing could have prepared me better for spending a month living with my relatives. When my cousin came to pick me up at the flybus stop in Reykjavik, I told her the story of how I'd forgotten my passport and almost missed my flight, entirely in Icelandic – and she understood me! On my first afternoon, I walked into a used bookstore in Reykjavik and asked the proprietor if he had any books of poetry by Páll Olafsson (my great grandmother's brother), and he, too, had no trouble understanding either my sentence construction or accent. The next day I joined the intermediate Icelandic class, and found that both the beginning and intermediate classes would be using the *Learning*

Icelandic text.

Am I now a fluent speaker of Icelandic? No, and I'm certain that I never will be—but I don't let that discourage me. I've discovered that learning even a small amount of this language can be extremely rewarding for anyone wishing to forge a deeper connection with Iceland's people, culture, and history. For many of us, learning some Icelandic is all we'll ever do. Others may have the linguistic skill and dedication to achieve true mastery. But whatever your reasons for undertaking Icelandic—and especially if you are attempting a self-study program – you will find no better introduction to this beautiful and inspiring language than *Learning Icelandic.* The only thing I found lacking was enough exercises for reinforcing the grammar lessons. Happily, I've learned that a follow-up volume has recently been released, *Learning Icelandic – Grammar Exercises,* to provide additional practice with that pesky grammar.

Books by Gillian Johnson

Reviewed by Lorna Tergesen

Sarah No Hair
Written and Illustrated by Gillian Johnson
Annick Press 1550372114

My Sister Gracie
Written and Illustrated by Gillian Johnson
Tundra Books 088776 5149

Bun Bun's Birthday
Written by Richard Scrimger
Illustrated by Gillian Johnson
Tundra Books 088776 5203

Princess Bun Bun
Written by Richard Scrimger
Illustrated by Gillian Johnson
Tundra Books 088776 5432

The Cat and the Wizard
Written by Dennis Lee
Illustrated by Gillian Johnson
Key Porter Books 155263 3845

Gillian Johnson's artwork is quite recognizable once you have seen any of her children's books. Her first book *Sara No Hair* set the tone. To say that her work is whimsical is an understatement. She can set the tone of her characters without words, but that does not mean that her words do not convey a precise message.

This story gives you the magic of being on the beach and digging a huge hole, leading to where?

My Sister Gracie is about two dogs.

The story line is based on a true experience of a friend of Gillian's. The owner, believing that her pet is lonely while she is away at work, goes to the pound to adopt a "brother". The original dog is male: the newly acquired one is female. Rivalry springs up, as is often the case with siblings. Gracie, the new dog is fat and ugly, while Fabio, the original dog, is sleek and small. Fabio takes Gracie to the park to meet his friends (other dogs). When "his friends" begin to taunt and tease Gracie, Fabio becomes the protective brother. The story line follows the experience of having to come to terms with a new sibling---something many children have to work through. The age range for the book would be three years to six or seven. As a bedtime story, I am sure it would be memorized very quickly and the child would ask for it to be read repeatedly.

Bun Bun's Birthday and *Princess Bun Bun* are stories written by Richard Scrimger which also deal with relevant issues for children. Bun Bun is only one year old or in the second book just slightly older. In *Bun Bun's Birthday,* where she is about to turn one, her older sister cannot deal with all the attention the baby is receiving. The party preparations are the theme of the book. It takes an understanding mother to detect what the problem is and offer a solution. In the follow up book, Bun Bun toddles alone into an open elevator at a high rise, a modern day castle, the panic of losing the toddler can be felt by the reader. However, it is just a wonderful adventure for Bun Bun, who has just learned to walk. Parents can relate to the gut wrenching feelings of having a lost child. Sister Winifred finds her sister and all is well.

Bun Bun is a very sweet baby with her kiss curl and fancy dress. Winifred, the very jealous sister wears striped leggings and a tiara, giving you the impression of her status. There is also a little brother, Eugene, who wears glasses and has a bowl haircut. Gillian uses pen and ink drawings that she then colours beautifully with watercolours. Her artwork exhibits wonderful detail. One example that I particularly like was of Winifred and Eugene jumping on the bed. The view is from high above the bed, with a full picture window in the background, showing yet another complete scenario behind the jumping children.

The Cat and the Wizard is a rhyming delight that Gillian has brought to life with her whimsical artwork. The story is of an elderly wizard who is lonely and no longer respected. In Casa Loma lives a very fancy cat who too is lonely.

You can guess the story line. Again Gillian has succeeded in bringing to us all the colour and feelings of the day for these two characters. Her imagination is a delight.

Have the themes from these books been drawn from Gillian's own experience? It could well be. She is the youngest child of the late Dr. George and Doris Johnson. She is now the proud mother of two beautiful sons.

They may be giving her creative ideas on the activities and actions of youngsters. Gillian lives abroad in England and Tasmania. Her work is well recognized in the Canadian publishing industry. It is a very competitive market, where she fares well.

Contributors

TIMOTHY GRANT ARNASON has been a volunteer with the Islendingadagurinn for approximately 20 years. Tim works for Manitoba Public Insurance as Claims Division Manager. He lives in Winnipeg, and is married to Delphine and has two children, Alena and Brady.

SARA BERG was born in July 1987 and attends Churchill High School in Winnipeg. She writes in her journal consistantly and often writes poems. "Poems are a vent for emotions - both my feelings and those I pick up from others." Sent in by grandmother, Shirley Nordal- born and raised in Lundar, Man., now living in Winnipeg,

ANNE BRYDON is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Wilfrid Laurier University, in Waterloo Canada. Her current writing engages with modernity and modernism in Iceland, including the cultural politics of the whaling issue. She also has written about Winnipeg-based artists Eleanor Bond and William Eakin. With Sandra Niessen she co-edited Consuming Fashion: Adorning the Transnational Body (Berg 1998).

NINA LEE COLWILL is a psychologist and management consultant, the author of three books and some hundred articles and book chapters. She is currently writing her first novel.

DAVID JÓN FULLER is a Winnipeg-based freelance writer. His work has appeared in Lögberg-Heimskringla, The Icelandic Canadian, and Prairie Books Now, and he is a regular contributor to Uptown magazine.

SIGURBJORG STEFANSSON was a highly respected teacher. A school in Gimli bears her name. She was instrumental in establishing the libraries at Gimli, Riverton and Arborg. She had a great pride in her Icelandic heritage. Delving into the history led her to translating the letters so that they could be shared.

CHRISTINA SUNLEY is the granddaughter of one of the original New Iceland settlers, Dr. Olafur Bjornson, and his wife, Sigriður Brandson; her mother is Edith Bjornson, originally of Winnipeg, Manitoba. Christina's fiction has been published in a variety of literary journals.

LORNA TERGESEN is acting Editor of The Icelandic Canadian Magazine. She is involved in the Icelandic community, enjoying her cultural heritage, and sharing it with others.

Dr. Brandson, Reverend Marteinson, an unknown man and the Honourable Thomas Johnson. This photo was taken in St. Peter Minnesota. Can anyone identify the unknown fellow?

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