



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Gegnum formið sem leysist upp og hverfur

Ensk þýðing á Rafflesíublóminu eftir Steinar Braga

og umfjöllun um þýðinguna

Ritgerð til M.A.-prófs

Salka Guðmundsdóttir

Janúar 2011

Háskóli Íslands
Íslensku- og menningardeild

Þýðingafraeði

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Ágrip

Uppistaðan í verkefni þessu er ensk þýðing á sögunni *Rafflesíublómið* eftir Steinar Braga frá árinu 2009. Í fyrri hluta er fjallað um þýðingarferlið á fræðilegum forsendum og grundvallarspurningum þýðingafræðinnar, auk þess sem rýnt er í þýðingar á íslenskum samtímabókmenntum, stöðu þýddra skáldsagna fyrir fullorðna í hinum enskumælandi heimi og *Rafflesíublómið* staðsett í höfundarverki Steinars Braga. Skoðuð eru þrástef í verkum skáldsins, stílbrögð og möguleikar í þýðingu. Seinni hlutinn inniheldur sjálfa þýðinguna, *The Rafflesia Flower*.

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I. hluti

Um þýðingarferlið frá fræðilegu sjónarhorni og í
samhengi við höfundarverk Steinars Braga

1. Inngangur

Þýðandinn hefur það merkilega og vandmeðfarna hlutverk að geta opnað dyr á milli menningarheima og fært lesendum viðtökumálsins brot af menningu frummálsins. Kveikjan að því meistaraprófsverkefni sem hér má lesa var löngun til að bæta við fátæklega flóru íslenskra samtímabókmennta í enskri þýðingu. Uppistaðan í verkefninu er þýðing mín á nóvellu Steinars Braga, *Rafflesíublóminu*, er birtist fyrst í þriggja sagna safninu *Himinninn yfir Þingvöllum* sem út kom hjá Máli og menningu árið 2009. Hér í fyrri hlutanum er fjallað um aðdraganda þýðingarinnar og stöðu þýðinga í enskumælandi löndum, auk þess sem sérstakur gaumur er gefinn að þýðingum íslenskra samtímabókmennta. Rætt er um grundvallarhugtök þýðingafræðinnar og hvernig þau má heimfæra upp á þýðinguna á *Rafflesíublóminu*. Textann verður óhjákvæmilegra að skoða í tengslum við önnur verk Steinars Braga; rýnt er í þrástef á borð við firringu hins vestræna nútímasamfélags, einmanaleika, dauða og aftengingu, sem og þau verkfæri sem höfundur beitir til að draga fram þessa áherslupætti. Eitt helsta einkennið á skáldsögum höfundarins er eins konar hægfara skynrof eða gliðnun á vitund persóna, sem endurspeglast í stíl og takti textans, og smitar út frá sér til lesandans. Þessa efnislegu og stílrænu gliðnun undirbyggir höfundur með framandgervingu á kunnuglegu umhverfi; *Rafflesíublómið* og fleiri sögur Steinars Braga gerast í eins konar skrumskældri Reykjavíkurborg sem er uppfull af feigð og einmanaleika. Í því ljósi verður hér fjallað sérstaklega um menningarlegt samhengi og staðhætti. Rýnt er í talsmáta persóna, en í stuttri og tiltölulega fámennri sögu hefur bein ræða jafnvel enn meiri vigt en ella og er eitt

beittasta tækið sem þýðandi hefur til að koma persónusköpun skáldsins til skila. Enn fremur er fjallað um tengsl tungumáls og hugsunar út frá kenningum um mótunaráhrif tungumálsins. Þar sem þýðingin fæddist nokkuð löngu á undan ritgerðarluta verkefnisins gefst einnig tækifæri til að fara yfir viðtökur og meta stöðu hennar sem sjálfstæðs verks.

2. Aðdragandi, íslenskar bókmenntir í þýðingum og viðhorf til þýðinga

Aðdraganda þessarar þýðingar minnar á *Rafflesíublóminu* eftir Steinar Braga má í raun rekja aftur til ársins 2005, þegar ég stundaði nám til M.Litt.-gráðu í skapandi skrifum við Glasgow-háskóla. Eftir að hafa starfað við þýðingar meðfram námi allt frá menntaskólaárunum hafði ég þróað með mér talsverðan áhuga á þýðingalistinni, stöðu hennar og sérkennum, sem og áhrifum þýðinga á tiltekin menningarsvæði; það hlutverk sem þýddar bókmenntir höfðu leikið í minni eigin lestrarupplifun allt frá barnæsku var greinilega mun meira að umfangi en hjá enskumælandi félögum mínum. Á árum mínum í Bretlandi vaknaði enn fremur hjá mér sérstakur áhugi á þýðingum íslenskra bókmennta yfir á ensku, en þegar kom að því að velja gjafir handa vinum þótti mér gaman að kynna þá fyrir íslenskri tónlist, kvikmyndalist og ekki síst bókmenntum. Ég tók því að grúska í því sem til var af íslenskum bókmenntum á ensku og komst að því að úrvalið var takmarkað og þýðingarnar misgóðar.

Raunar er erfitt að nálgast greinargóðar upplýsingar um íslenskar bókmenntir útgefnar á ensku. Hvergi er að finna gagnagrunn þess efnis; aftur á móti hafa verið teknir saman listar yfir íslenskar bókmenntir á þýsku, pólsku, frönsku og ítölsku, og eru þeir

aðgengilegir á vefsíðu sem helguð er þátttöku Íslands í bókasýningunni í Frankfurt 2011.¹ Nýlegasta skrá yfir íslenskar bókmenntir á ensku sem mér tókst að hafa upp á er listi Kenneths H. Ober yfir útgefnar þýðingar á árunum 1981-1992, en þrettán ár eru nú liðin frá útgáfu ritsins.² Áður hafði Ober tekið saman sams konar ritaskrár yfir áratugin á undan. Það kemur tæplega á óvart að þeir tveir íslensku höfundar sem mest er til eftir á ensku skuli vera Halldór Kiljan Laxness og Arnaldur Indriðason. Í kjölfar þess að Laxness hlaut Nóbelsverðlaun í bókmenntum árið 1955 tók Magnús Magnússon heitinn til við þýðingar á verkum hans yfir á ensku. Á sjöunda áratugnum komu í fyrsta sinn út nokkrar skáldsögur Laxness í þýðingu Magnúsar; þær hafa síðan verið endurprentaðar og textinn endurskoðaður að einhverju leyti. Nú eru fáanlegar *The Atom Station*, *Paradise Reclaimed*, *The Fish Can Sing*, *Under the Glacier* og *World Light* í þýðingu Magnúsar Magnússonar, og árið 2003 kom út þýðing Philips Roughton á *Íslandsklukkunni*, *Iceland's Bell*. Roughton er einnig þýðandi *Vefarans mikla frá Kasmír* sem á ensku nefnist *The Great Weaver from Kashmir*. Þá er ótalin þýðing J.A. Thompson á þekktustu skáldsögu Laxness í hinum enskumælandi heimi, *Sjálfstæðu fólki* eða *Independent People*, sem hefur staðið óbreytt allt frá fyrstu prentun árið 1945.³

Endurskoðun og endurbætur á þýðingum vekja upp spurningar um stöðu þýddra texta. Okkur þykir eðlilegra að taka þýðingar til endurskoðunar en sjálfan frumtextann; gjarnan heyrst að tiltekin þýðing sé ef til vill of mörkuð af tíðaranda og úrelt að einhverju leyti. Með þessari röksemdafærslu er þó litið framhjá þeirri staðreynd að allur texti á sér

¹ „Íslenskar bókmenntir í þýðingum“, vefsíða.

² Ober, Kenneth H. *Bibliography of Icelandic Literature in Translation 1981-1992*.

³ Haraldur Sigurðsson, Sigríður Helgadóttir og Jökull Sævarsson. „Skrá um rit Halldórs Laxness á íslensku og erlendum málum“, aðgengileg á vefsíðu.

rætur í tilteknum tíma og á tilteknum stað – frumtexti verður ekki til í tómarúmi frekar en þýðing. Hvers vegna er frumtexti þá talinn „varanlegri“ en þýddur texti? Aftur á móti má einnig líta á þessa afstöðu okkar til þýðinga sem kost; hún gæðir textann ákveðnu flæði sem verður til þess að stöðugt er velt upp nýjum flötum á bókmenntaverkum (og þá einna helst svokölluðum „sígildum“ textum). Þegar nýr þýðandi tekst á við bókmenntaverk eða þýðing er tekin til endurskoðunar bætist enn við það sem kalla mætti verkið í heild sinni – frumtextann og allar þýðingar, aðlaganir og yfirfærslu í annað form, til dæmis leiktexta eða kvikmyndahandrit. Frá póststrúktúralísku sjónarmiði er „hvorki frumtextinn né þýðingin sjálfstæð merkingarleg heild“⁴, heldur tekur merkingarvið hvers texta til margþættra textatengsla og túlkunaratriða. Í póststrúktúralískum skilningi er þýðing „virk endurbygging á erlenda textanum sem sem markast af mál-, rök- og hugmyndafræðilegum muni [menningar frum- og viðtökumálsins] sem ekki er hægt að líta framhjá.“⁵

Af íslenskum samtímabókmenntum er lítið úrval á hinum enskumælandi markaði. Um miðjan tíunda áratuginn tók breska forlagið Greyhound Press sig til, gerði skurk í útgáfu íslenskra bókmennta og gaf út röð þýðinga á verkum samtímahöfunda á borð við Einar Kárason, Guðberg Bergsson og Ólaf Gunnarsson, en ritröðin sem bar yfirskriftina Shad Thames Books kom út í kjölfar íslenskrar listahátíðar við Essex-háskóla.⁶ Af þessari virðingarverðu ritröð eru enn til einhverjar hreytur en þær er þó frekar að finna í ferðamannahornum íslenskra bókabúða en í bókabúðum í Bretlandi.

⁴ Venuti, „Introduction“, 7.

⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁶ „Nú tíð og fortíð fléttuð saman“, grein aðgengileg á netinu.

Sem fyrr segir ber Arnaldur Indriðason höfuð og herðar yfir aðra samtímahöfunda þegar kemur að þýðingum yfir á ensku, en auk þess að hafa hlotið glæpasagnaverðlaunin Gullna rýtinginn árið 2005⁷ hefur Arnaldur notið góðs af þeirri tískubylgju norrænna glæpasagna sem enn lifir góðu lífi í Bretlandi sem og fleiri enskumælandi löndum. Sömmuleiðis hafa bækur Yrsu Sigurðardóttur um lögfræðinginn Þóru komið út á ensku og verið markaðssettar innan sama ramma. Höfundar á borð við Henning Mankell, Jo Nesbø, Stieg Larsson og Karin Fossum hafa náð mikilli útbreiðslu á síðustu árum. Þær vinsældir sem norrænar glæpasögur hafa notið í lestrarmenningu sem er alla jafna lítt gefin fyrir þýddar bókmenntir eru útskýrðar á nokkuð sannfærandi hátt af breska bókmenntarýninum John Crace. Annars vegar eiga þessar bækur sér kirfilegar rætur í hinni sígildu, bresk-evrópsku glæpasagnahefð – sem merkir að formið er aðgengilegt – og hins vegar eru þær skrifaðar inn í hæfilega framandi umhverfi sem vekur áhuga og spennu án þess að vera algjörlega ókunnugt.⁸ Stíllinn í bókum þeirra Hennings Mankell og Arnaldar, til að mynda, er afar hefðbundinn og lítt tilraunakenndur, sem aftur endurspeglast í þýðingum á texta þeirra. Hinn enskumiðaði lesandi þarf því ekki að reika óþægilega langt út af sínum kunnuglega slóða.

Breski þýðandinn Bernard Scudder, sem búsettur var á Íslandi um árabíl en lést sviþlega fyrir aldur fram árið 2007, hafði verið helsti þýðandi íslenskra bókmennta yfir á enska tungu í rúman áratug; auk þess að vinna að þýðingum á fornsögum Íslendinga þýddi hann meðal annars *Svan* Guðbergs Bergssonar og *Engla alheimsins* eftir Einar Má Guðmundsson fyrir fyrrnefnda ritröð Shad Thames Books. Að öðrum ólöstuðum var

⁷ „The CWA Gold and Silver Daggers 2005“, vefsíða.

⁸ Crace, „Move over, Ian Rankin“, grein aðgengileg á netinu.

Bernard líklega fjölhæfasti þýðandi samtímans úr íslensku yfir á ensku; áralöng búseta hans á Íslandi og áhugi á íslenskri menningu leiddu til þeirrar þekkingar á íslensku samfélagi er einkennir verk hans ásamt með ágætri stíltilfinningu. Ljóður þýðinga hans er ef til vill sá að ekki var alltaf tekin nægilega skýr ákvörðun um aðferðafræði; ef til að mynda er rýnt í *Grafarþögn* Arnaldar Indriðasonar, eða *Silence of the Grave* eins og hún nefnist á ensku, má sjá að þýðandinn velkist dálítið í vafa með samtöl, blæbrigði og orðaforða. Það er líkt og ekki hafi verið tekin endanleg ákvörðun um það hversu langt skyldi ganga í að laga textann að bresku talmáli og þar af leiðandi lendir útkoman einhvers staðar mitt á milli hins framandgerða og hins kunnuglega. Samstarf Bernards Scudder við Arnald Indriðason verður engu að síður að teljast æði merkilegur kafli í þýðingarsögu íslenskra bókmennta. Bernard skildi eftir sig stórt skarð sem vart hefur tekist að fylla, enda ekki sérlega auðvelt að finna fólk sem býr bæði yfir næmni gagnvart texta og innihaldi, og hefur svo góð tók á máli og menningu þriðjundruð þúsund sála að geta þýtt jafnt fornar sem nýjar bókmenntir þeirra.

Við keflinu í glæpaþýðingunum hafa tekið þau Victoria Cribb og Philip Roughton, en fátt er til af íslenskum samtímabókmenntum á ensku sem ekki inniheldur lögreglumenn eða lík. *101 Reykjavík*, skáldsaga Hallgríms Helgasonar, fékk á sig hálfgerðan költ-blæ upp úr aldamótum og var meðal annars þýdd yfir á ensku af Íranum Brian Fitzgibbon; vinsældir sögunnar – og samnefndrar kvikmyndar – fóru saman við og voru í raun ákveðinn hluti af þeirri svölu, uppblásnu ímynd lands og þjóðar sem tröllreið umfjöllun um íslenskt menningarlíf á erlendri grundu upp úr árþúsundamótum, áður en landið varð þekktara fyrir vafasama bankamenn en skæslegar barflugur.

Bandarískir útgefendur sem stíla inn á hinn stærri markað telja það almennt sérlega ómarkaðsvænt að kynna bók sem þýðingu⁹; það er nokkuð núturleg staðreynd að þýðanda skáldsagna Ólafs Jóhanns Ólafssonar (sem kallar sig Olaf Olafsson í Bandaríkjunum) er hvergi getið sem slíks, heldur honum einungis þakkað á kreditsíðu. Þannig er gefið í skyn að Ólafur hafi sjálfur þýtt textann ellegar upprunalega ritað hann á ensku, enda er nánast ómögulegt að nálgast nokkrar upplýsingar um þýðandann. Fráfælingarmáttur þýðinga er greinilega metinn ofar vinnu og heiðri þýðandans.

Í Bretlandi gáfu Telegram Books út *Skugga-Baldur* eftir Sjón í kjölfar þeirrar athygli sem bókin fékk á alþjóðlegum vettvangi vegna Bókmenntaverðlauna Norðurlandaráðs árið 2005. Fyrirnefnd Victoria Cribb þýddi *Skugga-Baldur*, eða *The Blue Fox*, og fangar afar vel þann knappa, ljóðræna stíl sem gerir bók Sjóns að því listaverki sem hún er. Bókin kom út í kilju og skartar tilvitnun í Björk Guðmundsdóttur á kápunni, enda í allri markaðssetningu gert út á textavinnu Sjóns fyrir Björk og tengsl hans við íslenskan tónlistarheim, sem er ef til vill vænlegra til að vekja athygli í Bretlandi en skírskotanir í norræn bókmenntaverðlaun. Nýlega kom einnig út í Bretlandi *Heaven and Hell*, þýðing Philips Roughton á *Himnaríki og helvíti* Jóns Kalmans Stefánssonar. Tvær bækur Braga Ólafssonar hafa enn fremur komið út hjá háskólaforlagi í Bandaríkjunum; fyrst þýddi Janice Balfour *Gæluðýrin* og nú síðast kom út þýðing Lyttons Smith á *Sendiherranum, The Ambassador*. Það sem athygli vekur við þá síðarnefndu er að þýðandinn skuli hafa valið að framandgera textann upp að vissu marki; hann gengur stundum svo langt að þýða íslensk

⁹ Valgerður Benediktsdóttir, munnleg heimild.

orðtök og orðaleiki beinum orðum¹⁰ og eyðir litlu púðri í að útskýra samhengi textans. Lesendum er látið eftir að finna samhengið sjálfir, ellegar njóta þýðingarinnar sem nokkuð framandlegs texta. Ákvörðunin er greinilega meðvituð, og staðsetur þýðinguna ef til vill í þeirri framandgervingarhefð sem Venuti telur eiga rétt á sér í dag; „markvisst menningarlegt inngrip í núverandi ástand heimsmála sem beinist gegn hinni ráðandi enskumælandi þjóð og þeim ójöfnu menningarskiptum sem hún stundar gagnvart *hinum* í hnattrænu samhengi.“¹¹ Venuti gerir skýran greinarmun á þessari menningarpólítísku ákvarðanatöku og framandgervingarstefnu fyrri alda, sem tíðkaðist til að mynda hjá þjóðverjum á klassíska og rómantíska tímabilinu, en bendir á að með póstrúktúralismanum hafi framandgervingin öðlast nýtt vægi.¹² Eitt af því sem áhrif getur haft á ákvarðanir þýðandans er vissulega það umhverfi sem þýðingunni er ætlað í bóksölulandslagi viðtökulandsins. Þegar bók sem fellur undir skilgreininguna „fagurbókmenntir“ er gefin út hjá háskólaforlagi – væntanlega með nokkuð vel lesinn markhóp í huga – er klárlega meira rými til að taka áhættu í þýðingarferlinu en þegar gefa skal út glæpasögu í svokallaðri „mass market paperback“ sem fær mikla dreifingu.

Þegar litið er á þær íslensku nútímabókmenntir sem þýddar hafa verið á erlend tungumál kemur strax í ljós hversu höllum fæti enskan stendur. Á frönsku er hægt að lesa Auði A. Ólafsdóttur, Steinunni Sigurðardóttur, Ólaf Hauk Símonarson, Jón Hall Stefánsson, Jón úr Vör, Guðrúnu Evu Mínerudóttur og Einar Kárason, svo örfáir séu nefndir. Þýsk bókaútgáfa hefur lengi lagt mikla rækt við þýðingar og af höfundum sem til eru í þýskri

¹⁰ Kravec, „A Novel, A Translation and Unapologetic Plagiarisms“, grein aðgengileg á netinu.

¹¹ Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*, 20. [Þýðing mín. Ath.: Allar þýðingar á tilvitnunum úr ensku eru mínar]

¹² Ibid., 20.

Þýðingu má nefna Huldur Breiðfjörð, Kristínu Steinsdóttur, Gerði Kristnýju, Andra Snæ Magnason, Vigdísu Grímsdóttur, Þórarín Eldjárn, Kristínu Mörju Baldursdóttur, Auði Jónsdóttur, Sigurbjörgu Prastardóttur og einnig Steinar Braga. Bókmenntir íslenskra höfunda eiga nokkuð greiða leið inn á þýskan markað og hefur markaðsstarf réttindaskrifstofa forlaganna skiljanlega einkennst nokkuð af því. Auk þess er fyrirhugaður heiðursess Íslands á bókasýningunni í Frankfurt 2011 líklega besta kynning sem íslenskar bókmenntir hafa fengið á erlendri grundu, en bókasýningin er stærsta bókasýning og bókakaupstefna heims.¹³

Það er þó sannarlega ekki hægt að kenna áhugaleysi íslenskra bókaforlaga um það hversu fábrotið úrval íslenskra nútímabókmennta er til á ensku. Á sama tíma og áhrif ensku og enskumiðaðrar menningar hafa breiðst út um heiminn hefur hlutur þýðinga í bókmenningu enskumælandi þjóða haldið áfram að skerðast. Venuti bendir á að strax eftir seinna stríð hafi breskir og bandarískir útgefendur raunar gefið út talsvert af þýðingum úr evrópskum málum, og notfært sér bæði forvitni lesenda um aðrar þjóðir sem og þá almennu áherslu tíðarandans að bætt samskipti og skilningur þjóða á milli gætu orðið til þess að skapa mannkyninu friðsamlegri lífsskilyrði. Leiðin lá þó fljótt niður á við. Í grein sinni um hlut þýðinga í bandarískri bókmenningu undirstrikar Aviya Kushner þá staðreynd að þrátt fyrir að verk skrifuð á ensku um framandi menningarheima vekji gjarnan athygli séu þýdd verk um svipað efni sjaldséð á metsölulistum, og í risavöxnum bókabúðum sé stundum erfitt að finna eina einustu þýðingu. Einnig er áhugavert að þrátt fyrir að sprenging hafi orðið í útgáfu bóka eftir tvítyngda höfunda velja þessir höfundar

¹³ „Ísland í Frankfurt 2011“, vefsíða.

nánast undantekningarlaust að skrifa á ensku og ná þannig til breiðari markhóps.¹⁴ Þannig verður fjöltengt samfélag einmála í bókmenningu sinni. Chad W. Post hjá Open Letter, bandarískum útgefanda Braga Ólafssonar, bendir á að þýðingum fækki ört milli ára; hann hefur tekið saman fjölda nýrra útgefina þýðinga á skáldverkum fyrir fullorðna í Bandaríkjunum og nefnir sem dæmi að þeim hafi fækkað úr 362 árið 2008 í 217 árið 2010.¹⁵ Samkvæmt tölum frá 2005 voru 3.54% útgefina skáldverka fyrir fullorðna í Bandaríkjunum þýðingar.¹⁶ Í Bretlandi árin 2007-2008 var sambærileg tala 3%,¹⁷ þannig að ekki er hægt að kenna hinu meinta lága menningarstigi Bandaríkjamanna um. Raunar koma út færri þýðingar á breskum bókamarkaði en í nokkru öðru Evrópulandi.¹⁸ Á sama tíma voru þýðingar 66% útgefina skáldverka í Finnlandi, 70% í Slóvakíu, 21,5% í Þýskalandi og 35% á Spáni¹⁹, þrátt fyrir að síðastnefnda landið hafi aðgang að gífurlegum fjölda bóka frá Suður- og Mið-Ameríku á þessu útbreiddasta ríkismáli sínu. Því dugir enginn einn tölfræðilegur áhrifabáttur til að útskýra þennan þennan gríðarlega mun; hvorki fólksfjöldi, útbreiðsla tungumálsins né landfræðileg staðsetning. Munurinn hlýtur að liggja í rótgróinni menningarlegri hefð – eða skorti á hefð – og viðhorfum til þýðinga. Í minni málsamfélögum hér á Vesturlöndum eru þýðingar – í báðar áttir – ekki aðeins æskilegar heldur nauðsynlegar dyr út í umheiminn. Ungverska leikskáldið András Nagy orðar það sem svo: „Þar sem við eigum okkur stórkostlegt og algjörlega einangrað tungumál ... tungumál sem opnast vart öðrum en þeim sem fæðast Ungverjar, er menning

¹⁴ Kushner, „McCulture“, grein aðgengileg á netinu.

¹⁵ Post, „New Year, New Databases, New Numbers“, grein aðgengileg á netinu.

¹⁶ Kushner, „McCulture“.

¹⁷ Fock et al., *Comparative income of literary translators in Europe*, 4.

¹⁸ Hale og Upton, „Introduction“, 1.

¹⁹ Fock et al., *Comparative income of literary translators in Europe*, 4.

okkar af nauðsyn bundin þýðingu.“²⁰ Samskipti einangraðri málsamfélaga við umheiminn fela óhjákvæmilega í sér þýðingar af ýmsum toga. Eins og Michael Cronin segir snúast þýðingar ekki aðeins um það hvernig við fáumst við önnur tungumál heldur einnig hvernig við upplifum og hugsum um okkar eigið mál.²¹ Í hinum enskumælandi og enskumiðaða heimi virðist ríkja einangrunartilhneiging sem hlýtur að einhverju leyti að mega rekja til þeirrar skoðunar að hinn enskumælandi heimur sé sjálfum sér nægur. Jafnvel þýðendur hafa haldið því fram að „ensk ljóðlist sé nægilega ríkuleg til að hafa litla þörf eða rými fyrir viðbætur í formi þýðinga.“²² Í þeim miklu kanónustríðum sem geisðu á enskumælandi bókmenntavelli undir lok tuttugustu aldar var kallað eftir því að hætt væri að útiloka höfunda sökum „kynþáttar, stéttar, kyns eða kynhneigðar.“²³ Hins vegar var ekki reynt að sama marki að opna kanónuna fyrir þýddum bókmenntum, sem enn eru víða felldar undir „heimsbókmenntir“ í sérmerktum háskólakúrsum í stað þess að þær séu settar í samhengi við bókmenningu viðkomandi málsamfélags og staða þeirra í viðkomandi menningu skoðuð.²⁴ Þýðingar eru hálfgerð olnbogabarn í bókmenntaumræðunni í stærstu enskumælandi samfélögum nútímans.

Því kynni einhver að spyrja: Hvers vegna að velja sér verkefni á svo þröngu og takmörkuð sviði? Hvers vegna ekki að halda sig við þýðingar yfir á íslensku – mitt eigið móðurmál – þar sem verkefnin eru næg? Samfara því að ég fór að velja fyrir mér enskum þýðingum á íslenskum bókmenntum vann ég sjálf að skrifa á ensku og kynntist Michael

²⁰ Nagy, „A Samovar Is A Samovar Is A Samovar“, 152.

²¹ Cronin, *Translation and Identity*, 30.

²² *Ibid.*, 31.

²³ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

Schmidt, mexíkósk-bresku ljóðskáldi, útgefanda og þýðanda sem var yfirkennari minn í skapandi skrifum. Mig langaði að prófa mig áfram með þýðingar yfir á ensku en var tvístígandi vegna þeirrar sterku hefðar að fólk þýði yfir á eigið móðurmál. Michael hvatti mig hins vegar til dáða og benti mér á þá kosti sem fylgdu því að þýða úr móðurmálinu yfir á manns annað mál. Meðal annars komu til tals þeir þættir sem mér virtust öðrum fremur spilla fyrir annars ágætum þýðingum á íslenskum bókmenntum; skilningur á íslensku nútímasamfélagi og tilfinning fyrir talmáli, samskiptamynstri og óformlegri tjáningu. Prófsteinn á þessar tilraunir mínar varð síðan eitt af verkefnum mínum í náminu, þegar ég þýddi tvær smásögur eftir foreldra mína, þau Olgu Guðrúnu Árnadóttur og Guðmund Ólafsson, og hlaut hæstu einkunn fyrir auk afar gagnlegrar umsagnar. Ég tel að það geti reynst ákveðinn kostur að koma „hinum megin“ að þýðingunni; hafa önnur tengsl við þýðingarmálið en flestir aðrir þýðendur íslenskra bókmennta. Sú staðreynd að svo lítið skuli vera þýtt yfir á ensku er í raun fremur hvatning en hitt. Það er talsvert af góðum nútímaskáldsögum sem eiga fullt erindi við enskumælandi lesendur en hafa ekki verið þýddar, og í því felst ákveðið sóknarfæri. Smæð íslensks samfélags kemur þýðandanum enn fremur til góða; aðgengi að forleggjum og höfundum er gott og auðvelt að koma hugmyndum á framfæri. Ég hafði starfað í lausamennsku fyrir Forlagið um nokkurra ára skeið þegar ég setti mig í samband við Silju Aðalsteinsdóttur vorið 2009 og leitaði hofanna um handrit til þýðingar, sem verið gæti uppistaðan í lokaverkefni mínu við Háskóla Íslands. Ég nefndi engin nöfn höfunda en viðurkenni fúslega að efst voru á blaði þau Steinar Bragi og Guðrún Eva Mínervudóttir. Silja brást snarlega við og sendi mér nafnlaust handrit um hæl. Eftir lesturinn tók ég boðinu með ánægju, fékk að vita að höfundurinn

væri Steinar Bragi (sem lá raunar sterklega undir grun allt frá fyrstu síðu) og hófst handa við greiningu og grófbýðingu á textanum.

3. Bresk/bandarísk enska

Sú enska sem mér er tamt að nota í samskiptum sem og ritmáli er bresk; eftir að hafa flutt til Bretlands rúmlega tvítug með nokkuð blandaða ensku í farteskinu – úr bókum, sjónvarpi, kvikmyndum og samskiptum við enskumælandi fólk af ýmsum uppruna – var ég nokkuð fljót að skipta yfir í breskan orðaforða, með velskum og skoskum tilbrigðum eftir því hvar ég bjó hverju sinni. Við upphaf þýðingarferlis *Rafflesíublómsins* tók ég þá ákvörðun að halda mig við breskan orðaforða og stafsetningu í stað þess að elta uppi einhvers konar „hlutlausan“ milliveg sem gæti á endanum orðið mér til trafala og gert þýðinguna flatari en ella. Þegar þýðingin var nokkurn veginn fullunnin gerðist það hins vegar að umboðsmaður Steinars Braga í Bandaríkjunum óskaði eftir því að fá afrit af textanum til kynningar á höfundinum hjá bandarískum forleggjurum. Ég brá á það ráð að yfirfara þýðinguna og búa til aðra útgáfu þar sem ákveðnum orðum var breytt til móts við bandaríska ensku, sem og orðalagi eða uppbyggingu setninga á nokkrum stöðum þar sem mér þótti of breskur blær á. „Lift“ varð til að mynda að „elevator“, „flat“ að „apartment“, „pavement“ að „sidewalk“ og ou-stafsetningu var breytt í hina bandarísku o-stafsetningu í orðum á borð við „colour“/„color“. Þegar þýðingin kom út í tveimur hlutum í bókmennta- og menningarritinu *Hayden's Ferry Review* við Arizona-háskóla, vor og haust 2010, las ritstjóri þýðinguna yfir og gerði smávægilegar breytingar í sama dúr en þó mun veigaminni en ég bjóst við; ritstjórnarstefna *Hayden's Ferry Review* reyndist vera sú að gefa

þýðendum mikið svigrúm til að velja verkum sínum stíl, í stað þess að hætta á að gera þýðingarnar eintóna. Í kjölfar þessarar útgáfu birtist mér raunar afmarkaður en afar frjór menningarvettvangur þar sem þýðingar eiga mun auðveldara uppdráttar en almennt í norður-amerískri bókaútgáfu; bókmenntarit og háskólaútgáfur leggja talsverða áherslu á að kynna erlenda höfunda fyrir lesendum sínum og skipar þýðandinn nokkuð stóran sess í umfjöllun og kynningu. Á svipuðum nótum er til að mynda safnritið *Best European Fiction 2011* sem bandarísk-breski útgefandinn Dalkey Archive Press gefur út og inniheldur smásögu eftir Kristínu Eiríksdóttur, en yfirlýst stefna ritraðarinnar er að færa enskumælandi lesendum og höfundum nýjustu stefnur og strauma í evrópskum bókmenntum, með það að markmiði að rjúfa þá einangrun sem hefur lengi einkennt enskumælandi svæði.²⁵

4. Um framandgervingu, aðlögun og hugmyndina um jafngildi

Ein stærsta ákvörðunin sem þýðandi stendur frammi fyrir við útfærslu verks er hin alræmda spurning um framandgervingu ellegar aðlögun, sem verið hefur í brennidepli mestallrar fræðilegrar umfjöllunar um þýðingar um aldaraðir. Schleiermacher talaði í upphafi nítjándu aldar um að annað hvort skyldi færa höfundinn til lesandans eða lesandann til höfundarins,²⁶ og hélt því fram að kostirnir væru algjörlega aðgreindir pólur og ekki væri neitt svigrúm til að fara millivegin. Á tuttugustu öldinni setti Nida fram þá staðhæfingu að nákvæmni í þýðingum fælist í því að ná fram jafngildum áhrifum í

²⁵ „Collection: Best European Fiction Series“, vefsíða.

²⁶ Schleiermacher, „On the Different Methods of Translating“, 230.

menningu þýðingarmálsins, og gekk svo langt að orða kenninguna sem svo að viðtakendur þýðingar ættu að skilja þýddan texta þannig að þeir skildu hvernig upprunalegir viðtakendur hefðu skilið frumtextann.²⁷ Sá sem gengst þessari kenningu á hönd verður að gefa sér þær forsendur að til sé einn viðtekinn skilningur á texta, og að í ólíkum málsamfélögum fyrirfinnist eitthvað sem kalla má algert jafngildi. Einnig er horft framhá því að merkingarsvið hvernar menningar er kvikt fyrirbæri í stöðugri félagsmótun.²⁸ Málið flækist því um leið og meta á í hverju svokallað menningarlegt jafngildi felst; hvernig má til dæmis „þýða“ þá stöðu sem tilteknir þjóðfélagshópar hafa í samfélagi frumtextans yfir í samfélag þýðingarmálsins? Enn fremur er skynjun fólks á ákveðnum hópum – staðalmyndir, fyrirfram viðtekin flokkun, hugrenningatengsl – gjarnan háð eigin menningu. David Katan bendir á að umhverfi og landfræðileg staðsetning séu ein af þeim leiðum sem við notum hvað mest við að flokka aðra, hvort sem við höfum haft nokkur raunveruleg afskipti af viðkomandi hópi eður ei.²⁹ Við skiptum fólki í „okkur“ og „þau“, og víða ríkir togstreita milli landshluta, hverfa eða borga sem vekur upp sterk hugrenningatengsl þegar viðkomandi staðir koma fram í texta. Klisjur eru eins konar menningarlegir flýtihnappar; þau hughrif sem þær vekja í tilteknu samfélagi geta vart átt sér jafngild hughrif í öðru samhengi. Katan tekur dæmi um *Essex-stelpuna* (Essex girl) sem í Bretlandi hefur stöðu eins konar erkitýpu; Essex-stelpa er hávær, skyni skroppin brussa sem sefur hjá hverjum sem er.³⁰ Hvernig ætti til að mynda að þýða hugmyndina um Essex-stelpuna yfir í íslenskt samfélag? Hugtakið felur í sér svo miklu meira en þessi stutta

²⁷ Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*, 22.

²⁸ Steiner, *After Babel*, 91.

²⁹ Katan, *Translating Cultures*, 46.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

útskýring gefur til kynna. Inn í spila meðal annars þjóðfélagsstaða í stéttskiptu samfélagi, aðrar viðteknar erkitýpur og stærra menningarlegt samhengi. Það er því hæpið að halda því fram að hægt sé að finna algjörlega jafngildan merkimiða í öðru samfélagi; raunar þarf ekki að fara tungumála á milli til að lenda í sömu kröggum heldur nægir að bera saman menningu Bandaríkjamanna og Ástrala, eða Chilebúa og Spánverja, til að sjá hversu mikil vandkvæði eru í reynd á jafngildishugmyndinni. Ákveðnar upplýsingar eru settar fram á fyrirfram gefnum forsendum í samhengi viðkomandi menningar.³¹ Pólski leikstjórinn og leikritabýðandinn Szczędna Klaudyna Rozhin út skýrir hugtakið „realia“ á þennan hátt: „[o]rð og orðasamsetningar sem tákna hluti og hugmyndir sem einkenna lífsmáta, menningu, félags- og sagnfræðilega þróun einnar þjóðar og eru framandi annarri þjóð.“³² Rozhin bendir þýðandanum á ýmsar aðferðir til að leysa vandamál tengd menningarlegum sérkennum; það megi breyta samhenginu, skipta út viðkomandi orði eða orðasambandi fyrir „hlutlaust“ hugtak, bæta við útskýringu eða þýða það einfaldlega beint og kynna málheim þýðingarinnar fyrir nýrri hugmynd. Rozhin er þó mishrfin af þessum leiðum og telur enga þeirra algilda eða fullkomna.³³ Eins og Bassnett-McGuire segir verður að gera ráð fyrir ákveðnum „menningarlegum óþýðanleika“ í hverri einustu þýðingu.³⁴

Á hinn bóginn er varhugavert að líta einfaldlega á það sem tap að ákveðnar upplýsingar skuli ekki komast til skila á sama hátt í þýðingu og í frumtexta. Menningarlegt gildi þýðingar hlýtur alltaf að verða annað í hinu nýja samhengi en í því samfélagi sem frumtextinn sprettur úr; hún er nýr flötur á ákveðnu verki og hluti af stærri heildarmynd,

³¹ Katan, *Translating Cultures*, 130.

³² Rozhin, „Translating the Untranslatable“, 140.

³³ Ibid., 139-141.

³⁴ Bassnett-McGuire, *Translation Studies*, 34.

eins og tæpt var á hér að ofan. Ef farið er að þeirri aðlögunarstefnu sem Nida leggur til er gengið mjög langt í þjónkun við þýðingarmálið og menningu þess; í stað þess að þýðing sé gerð á forsendum frumtextans og verksins sjálfs er verið að troða henni inn í annað menningarsamhengi með valdi. Venuti lýsir því sem svo að hér sé ekki um boðskipti eða tilfærslu á upplýsingum að ræða heldur sé verið að sölsa erlendan texta undir sig til heimabruks.³⁵ Sjálf er ég höll undir tilraunir Venutis til að þróa fræðilegan sem og praktískan vinkil á þýðingar sem veitir ráðandi menningargildum þýðingarmálsins ákveðna andspyrnu, með það að markmiði að draga fram mál- og menningarlegan framandleika textans.³⁶ Susan Sontag deildi á ríkjandi aðlögunarstefnu í frönskum þýðingum og setti spurningamerki við hugmyndina um „læsileika“:

Þegar ég heyri að bók eftir mig eða einhvern annan sé nú mjög læsileg á frönsku, þökk sé framlagi þýðandans, veit ég að bókin hefur verið endurmótuð samkvæmt viðteknum hefðum fransks nútímaprósa (og yfirleitt ekki þeim vönduðustu). En þar sem prósin minn er ekki alltaf hefðbundinn í hryn sínum eða orðavali get ég verið viss um að því hefur ekki verið komið til skila á frönsku.³⁷

Enn fremur er nauðsynlegt að líta á textann í heild sinni og öðlast tilfinningu fyrir blæ hans, stíl og uppbyggingu áður en hægt er að taka afstöðu til mjög einangraðra þátta. Susan Bassnett-McGuire heldur því fram að þýðingar á skáldskap séu oft því marki brenndar að þýðendur hafi lagt of mikla áherslu á að búa til „læsilegan“ texta á þýðingarmálinu, til þess að forðast þann stirðleika sem hlotist getur af of mikilli fylgispekt við setningabyggingu frummálsins, en gleymi að líta til þess hvernig einstaka setningar

³⁵ Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*, 22.

³⁶ Ibid., 23.

³⁷ Sontag, „The World as India“, grein aðgengileg á netinu.

falla inn í heildina.³⁸ Hins vegar verður að gera afar skýran greinarmun á því að taka meðvitaðar ákvarðanir um stílbrögð og á því þegar þýðing er slælega unnin og hinn alræmði „þýðingarbragur“ litar textann allan, þannig að hann verður skrykkjóttur aflestrar og setningabygging órökrétt á þýðingarmálinu. Þegar talað er um trúnað við textann stinga nefnilega upp kollinum vandamál sem í raun spretta úr sama jarðvegi og vandkvæði tengd aðlögunarstefnu; eins og Barnstone bendir á gengur hugmyndin um fullkominn trúnað einnig út frá því – í raun úr hinni áttinni – að til sé fullkomið jafngildi, að til sé jafnan „A = A“³⁹ í tveimur tungumálum. Líkt og Barnstone segir er aldrei jafnræði milli frumtexta og þýðingar, meðal annars af þeirri ástæðu að „merking ólíkra tungumála getur skarast, en aldrei farið algjörlega saman; á sama hátt er hljómur hvers tungumáls ólíkur hljómi annarra mála.“⁴⁰ Það er því nokkuð rökrétt að fallast á þá staðhæfingu Barnstones að best sé að sætta sig við það í eitt skipti fyrir öll að ekki sé til sá texti sem þýða megi „fullkomlega“.⁴¹ Það liggur í eðli boðskipta og mannlegs samfélags. Hugmyndin um „nákvæmni“ í bókmenntaþýðingum hlýtur að fela í sér að hægt sé að leggja mat á meinta nákvæmni; eins og Johnston bendir á hvílir sú afstaða að þýðingar séu eftirlíking eða afrit af upprunalegum texta á afar stöðnuðu viðhorfi til tungumálsins.⁴² Hlutverk þýðandans er að „færa upplýsingar milli tungumála“⁴³, þýðingar eru í raun „meta-samskipti“⁴⁴ sem vísa í margar áttir, og útgangspunkturinn má ekki vera sá að þýðandi eigi að endurskapa

³⁸ Bassett-McGuire, *Translation Studies*, 115.

³⁹ Barnstone, *The Poetics of Translation*, 42.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴² Johnston, „Translation as Simulacrum“, 43.

⁴³ Barnstone, *The Poetics of Translation*, 260.

⁴⁴ Hermans, *The Conference of the Tongues*, 119.

frumtextann á fullkominn hátt fyrir hinn fullkomna lesanda.⁴⁵ Í vinnu þýðandans felst óhjákvæmilega túlkun; þýðandinn er lesandi höfundar og síðan sjálfur höfundur sem skrifar fyrir lesanda.⁴⁶ Sú greiningarvinna sem þýðandinn framkvæmir – hversu markviss sem hún annars er – hlýtur alltaf að vera túlkun á frumtextanum sem litast af öllum ákvörðunum (eða skorti á ákvörðunum) frá þýðandans hendi. Hjá því verður ekki komist að hann eigi rödd í textanum, skilji eftir sig það sem Paloposki kallar „fótspor“.⁴⁷ Líkt og Bassnett-McGuire útskýrir nálgast þýðandinn verkið í gegnum fleiri en eitt mállegt kerfi og túlkun hans litast bæði af frummálinu og þýðingarmálinu. Enn fremur hlýtur þýðingin að „endurspegla skapandi túlkun sjálfs þýðandans á frumtextanum.“⁴⁸ Það er þessi túlkun sem gerir þýðingarferlið spennandi og lyfti því upp á annað plan; þýðingar eru ekki einungis þjónusta við annarra verk heldur sköpun.

Þegar upp er staðið verð ég að vera ósammála félagi Schleiermacher; sú leið sem mér þótti henta best við þýðingu á Rafflesíublóminu var í raun blönduð. Það er trú mín að þýðing eigi ekki að hafna sjálfri sér og láta sem hún sé ekki þýðing; það er jú nokkuð augljóst við lestur flestra þýðinga að þær spretta úr öðrum menningarheimi og þar af leiðandi er einkennilegt að reyna að bæla niður öll „erlend einkenni“ á textanum. Ég tek undir þá skoðun Venutis að þegar of mikil áhersla er lögð á „eðlileika“ og látið eins og merkingarlegu jafngildi sé náð sé verið að draga úr eða jafnvel útmá þann mun sem þýðingunni er ætlað að koma til skila.⁴⁹ Gildi þýðinga liggur ekki aðeins í

⁴⁵ Barnstone, *The Poetics of Translation*, 261.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 232.

⁴⁷ Paloposki, „Limits of Freedom“, 191.

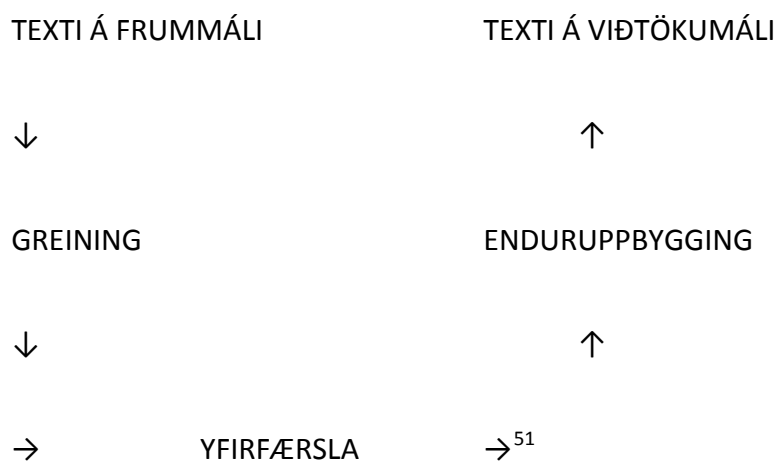
⁴⁸ Bassnett-McGuire, *Translation Studies*, 80.

⁴⁹ Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*, 21.

sameiningarkraftinum heldur sérstöðunni.⁵⁰ Annars vegar reyndi ég að halda í viss stílræn sérkenni höfundarins, eins og vikið verður betur að síðar, en hins vegar gæta þess að textinn rynni vel á ensku, væri sjálfstætt verk og ekki óaðgengilegur.

5. Um þýðingarferlið

Líkan Nida af þýðingarferlinu má auðveldlega heimfæra á vinnu mína að þýðingunni á *Rafflesíublóminu*:



Þegar ég hófst handa við lestur á frumtexta og síðan hráþýðingu – eins konar atögu að þýðingunni – var sjálf sagan ekki fullunnin heldur á ritstjórnarstigi. Ég fékk því að fylgjast með því hvernig frumtextinn þróaðist í samvinnu höfundar og ritstjóra, fékk nokkrar útgáfur af sögunni til vinnslu og sá hvernig áherslur smám saman skýrðust og textinn varð meitlaðri. Það voru talsverð forréttindi að fá að vinna með textann á þessu stigi málsins; bæði fékk ég lengri tíma til að melta hann og öðlaðist skýrari sýn á það hver þungamiðja

⁵⁰ Cronin, *Translation and Identity*, 121.

⁵¹ Bassnett-McGuire, *Translation Studies*, 16.

sögunnar var, hvað höfundurinn vildi draga fram. Vinnuferlið var því um margt ólíkt því sem ég á að venjast – að fá sent tilbúið handrit sem ýmist er þegar komið út eða bíður útgáfu, og vinna þýðinguna alfarið á eigin spýtur allt þar til hún fer í hendur prófarkalesara. Við það að fylgjast svo náið með tilurð frumtextans fékk ég smám saman þá heildarsýn á textann sem er ekki sjálfgefið að öðlast þegar fyrir liggur knappur skilafrestur og lítið ráðrúm til yfirlegu. Þegar mér hafði borist endanlegt handrit frumtextans tók lokaspjetturinn við og á því stigi fékk ég vel skrifandi breska vini til að lesa þýðinguna yfir.

Fyrir þýðandann er afskaplega mikill kostur að hafa aðgang að öðrum verkum höfundar. Bæði öðlast þýðandinn skarpari tilfinningu fyrir stíl skáldsins og eins verður hann meðvitaðri um þau stef sem eru skáldinu hugleikin. Eftir að ég hafði hráþýtt fyrstu útgáfu *Rafflesíublómsins* og áður en ég tók til við markvissari nákvæmnisvinnu las ég (ýmist í fyrsta eða annað sinn) öll útgefin verk Steinars Braga og leit á það sem mikilvægan hluta af vinnuferlinu. Í kjölfarið var aðkoma mín að *Rafflesíublóminu* hnitmiðaðri; ég átti mun auðveldara með að finna mína eigin nálgun og áherslur. Í heimi hins hraða og oft hroðvirknislega útgáfubransa gefst að sjálfsgöðu ekki alltaf tími til slíkrar yfirlegu. Kjöraðstæður þýðandans eru hins vegar að hafa ráðrúm til að kynna sér heildarmyndina og lesa sér til.

6. *Rafflesíublómið* – helstu stef og stílbrögð með hliðsjón af öðrum verkum

Steinars Braga

Þegar staðsetja á *Rafflesíublómið* í höfundarverki Steinars Braga kemur fljótt í ljós að í þessari tiltölulega stuttu sögu vinnur hann áfram með ýmis stef úr fyrri verkum. Hún kallast í raun á við allar fyrri bækur höfundarins að einhverju marki, bæði efnislega og stílrænt séð, en á það sammerkt með *Konum* að vera hnitmiðaðri og strípaðri en þær sem á undan komu. Eitt helstu einkenna á skáldskap Steinars Braga er sú tilfinning, sem stigmagnast í textanum, að í aðsigi sé eitthvað hörmulegt og óumflýjanlegt. Það er feigð falin í textanum og uppbyggingu hans. Allsráðandi er einmanaleiki manneskjunnar sem reynir af vanmætti að finna einhvers slags tengingu við annað fólk, en flýr á sama tíma allt sem heitið getur sönn tilfinning. Emil, aðalpersónan í *Rafflesíublóminu*, lifir í sjálfskapaðri einangrun í íbúð látins afa síns; raunar á hann erfitt með að átta sig á því hvort hann hafi raunverulega valið sér þessa tilveru eða einungis eins og liðið inn í hana á ómarkvissri ferð sinni gegnum lífið. Veröld Emils markast af samskiptaleysi, einveru og doða. Hann á að vera að vinna að háskólaritgerð og reynir þannig að réttlæta það hvernig hann hefur lokað á umheiminn, en hann nær ekki tengslum við eigin hugsanir og ritgerðin verður jafn fjarlæg og óskýr og annað í umhverfi hans. Aðdráttaraflið fyrir stelpuna er raunar þessi sama kyrrstaða: „Ég fer út og væflast um og allt breytist, hlutir gerast, skilurðu, í umheiminum, en ekki hérna, hérna breytist ekkert.“⁵² Tilvera persónunnar Emils er bæði afmörkuð andlega og efnislega; íbúðin á Ljósvallagötu sem snýr út að gamla kirkjugarðinum verður tákn fyrir smækkaða, þrönga tilveru. Veggir hennar eru Emil bæði

⁵² Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 52.

skjól og fangelsismúrar. Í verkum Steinars Braga má víða sjá viðlíka afmörkun á rými. Í Sherlock Holmes-paródíunni *Hið stórfenglega leyndarmál Heimsins* er það skemmtiferðaskipið Heimurinn sem er míkrókosmós, smækkuð og stýrð útgáfa af hinum ytri heimi. Ótti og firring nútímamannsins birtast í þessari afgirtu veröld þar sem reynt er að hafa stjórn á óreiðukenndum heimi:

„Heimurinn hefur breyst; fólk er hræddara við að deyja og lifa og fara úr húsi – að vera rænt, eða drepíð, sprengt í loft upp ... að húsið hrynji undan því í jarðskjálfta, eða flóðbylgja drekki þér og unnustu þinni, á gangi eftir ströndinni. [...] Á skipi eins og þessu ertu umkringdur vatni og á stöðugri hreyfingu; öryggisveitir um borð eru skipaðar elítuhermönnum sem eru búnir bestu vopnum sem finnast. Og maturinn er óaðfinnanlegur hvar sem er í skipinu, og hitastigið, litur á málningu og staðsetning plantna var ákveðin í samráði við föng sví-presta, innanhússhönnuði og sálfræðinga[.]“⁵³

Hræðslan við áhættuna sem felst í því að lifa verður til þess að fólk reynir að koma böndum á alla óvissu. Eða eins og Martin, kunningi Emils, orðar það í *Rafflesíublóminu*: „Einhvern tímann sammæltumst við um að lifa lengi, í öryggi og leiðindum – svona yfirleitt, fremur en stutt og í blárauðum draumi, fullum af kynlífi, eða að minnsta kosti dauða og *ofbeldi*.“⁵⁴ Þátttakan í tilverunni er síuð í gegnum manngert net. Engu að síður er míkrókosmósið á skemmtiferðaskipinu Heimum rotið að innan; þar ríkir óreiða og ljótleiki í bland við yfirdrifinn glæsileikann. Í þessum flótta frá hinu raunverulega og óljósa felst úrkynjun sem hlýtur að geta af sér óhugnað. Það sama gildir um glæsiháýsið sem Evu, aðalpersónunni í *Konum*, er boðið að gæta. Húsið er fullt af öryggismyndavélum, þar er fullbúin líkamsræktarstöð og allt til alls, en samfélagið í húsinu er yfirborðskennt og

⁵³ Steinar Bragi, *Hið stórfenglega leyndarmál Heimsins*, 28.

⁵⁴ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 14.

kuldalegt; háhýsið er ekki í neinum tengslum við nánasta umhverfi sitt eða borgina í kring. Íbúarnir eru enda ósýnilegir öðrum borgarbúum: „Glerið í öllu húsinu var speglandi og sást bara út um það.“⁵⁵ Innanstokksmunirnir og allur blærinn á íbúðinni markast af firringu og yfirborðsmennsku, „húsgögnin svört, grá og hvít, úr leðri, gleri, járn, fletirnir sléttir og glampanði – eins og gefið væri frá upphafi að stærð íbúðarinnar útilokaði að hægt væri að gera hana mannlega.“⁵⁶ Húsið sjálft verður eins og persóna í sögunni; það sama á við um herbergið þar sem Emil lokar sig inni með líkinu. Eva í *Konum* er á flóttu undan eigin fortíð sem leiðir hana inn í háhýsið þar sem hún verður leiksoppur annarra. Hún snýr aftur til Íslands eftir langa dvöl erlendis en nær ekki sambandi við samfélagið og stendur utan við bæði sitt gamla líf í Bandaríkjunum og lífið á Íslandi. Á sama hátt er Emil ófær um að taka raunverulegan þátt í lífinu og býr sér þess vegna til afmarkað rými; fyrst í íbúðinni á Ljósvallagötu og síðar í herbergi hinnar látnu niðri við höfnina, í kuldalegu og mannfjandsamlegu leiguhúsnæði þar sem býr urmull af fólki sem hann aldrei sér:

Þeir fóru inn í litla lyftu sem bar þá upp á fimmtu hæð, gengu eftir löngum gangi þar sem voru hátt í fimmtán dyr hvorum megin, allar grænar á litinn. Gangurinn var þögull, ekkert diskaglamur eða væl í börnum, engin tónlist eða samræður sem bárust gegnum dyrnar.⁵⁷

Húsvörðurinn lætur að því liggja að á bak við luktar dyr fari fram alls kyns óhugnaður: „Láttu ekki þögnina blekkja þig.“⁵⁸ Emil lokar sig hins vegar algjörlega af og býr sér til nýja en ennþá takmarkaðri tilveru. Þegar honum finnst hann loksins vera að takast á við lífið, taka af skarið og ná stjórn á eigin gjörðum – með því að grafa upp stúlkuna og koma henni

⁵⁵ Steinar Bragi, *Konur*, 9.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁷ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 69.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

fyrir í herberginu – gerir hann ekki annað en að færa sig inn í annað og enn einangraðra, afmarkað rými. Hann lifir á forsendum dauðans og tilraunir hans lúta ekki að því að ná stjórn á lífinu heldur dauðanum.

Dauðinn er gegnumgangandi stef í *Rafflesíublóminu*. Ritgerðarefnið sem Emil hefur valið sér er dauðinn í verkum Halldórs Laxness; stelpan vill meina að ritgerðin snúist meira um dauðann en Laxness. Morguninn eftir að stelpan rekst inn til Emils í fyrsta sinn verður honum hugsað til þess hversu undarlegt það sé að hún skuli hafa endað hjá honum: „Stelpan eins og hún þvældist ekki ein um göturnar eða settist óboðin upp á mann sem bjó við kirkjugarð og hugsaði ekki um neitt nema dauðann.“⁵⁹ Dauðinn er engu að síður óraunverulegur og fjarlægur, þrátt fyrir að hann vofi yfir alla söguna; í vestrænni nútímamenningu er áherslan á að halda dauðanum fjarri hversdagsleikanum, framandgera hann og afvopna. Martin segir við Emil: „Í vissum skilningi höfum við sigrað dauðann, eða náð að reisa um okkur þetta brjóstvirki menningar til að halda honum fjarri! Afrek, vinur minn? Eða ekki? Er máské eitthvert gjald sem við greiðum fyrir þetta? Fórnarkostnaður? Eitthvað sem okkur yfirsést? Eitthvað sem skiptir máli?“⁶⁰ Það er kenning Martins að mannkynið hafi afneitað ofbeldinu sem býr í því sjálfu, reynt að reisa um sig varnarmúr og þannig fjarlæggt sig frá því óhugnanlega en um leið frá allri raunverulegri upplifun. Hræðslan við að verða fyrir skaða, við að deyja, leiðir til doðaástands. Þrálátar hugsanir Emils um dauðann má í raun rekja til þess hversu langt hann er kominn frá lífinu sjálfu. Tilverusvið hans minnkar stöðugt þar til það er varla til staðar, er eiginlega líkara dauðaástandi en tilvist lifandi veru. „Líf hans var

⁵⁹ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 11.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

meðvitundarlaust, streymdi hring eftir hring í gegnum vél sem hann hafði smíðað utan um sig sjálfur.⁶¹ Sjálfur titill sögunnar vísar í dauðann; Rafflesíublómið er einkennileg hitabeltisplanta sem ber stærstu blóm veraldar, hefur að öðru leyti nánast enga skýra byggingu en gefur frá sér lykt af rotnandi holdi þegar hún blómgast.⁶² Titillinn er nokkuð margslunginn. Hann skírskotar til nærveru dauðans í sögunni og þeirrar rotnunar sem birtist hvað eftir annað í textanum. Í íbúðinni á Ljósvallagötu má enn finna lyktina af páfagauk Emils sem brann til dauða, Martin vinnur fyrir sér með því að rækta ánamaðka og tína þá í görðum, og í lokahluta sögunnar hefur Emil búið um sig ásamt með rotnandi líki. Hann reynir að streitast á móti rotnuninni en hún er óumflýjanleg. Lík stúlkunnar verður eins og Rafflesíublóm; í dauðanum springur hún út og blómgast. Skapabarmarnir þrýstast út „eins og Rafflesíublóm sem vildi brjótast upp á yfirborðið.“⁶³ Þau tengsl sem Emil telur sig ná við látna stúlkuna eru nánasta sambandið sem hann myndar í sögunni og þegar stelpan svo birtist lifandi úti á götu eru það eins og svik við Emil að hún skuli vera á lífi. Það vekur með honum viðbjóð að sjá hana iðandi af lífi: „Augun í henni glömpuðu og gljáðu og hreyfðust til og frá, hún var krökk af litlum, kvikum hreyfingum og honum fannst eins og heitt, þrúgandi blóð niðaði um andlit hennar og veröldina og litaði himininn rauðan.“⁶⁴ Lífið er orðið óeðlilegra en dauðinn.

Í verkum Steinars Braga er yfirleitt erfitt að sundurgreina ljótleika og fegurð; það er fegurð og ljóðræna í lýsingum á því sem ætti að vekja viðbjóð, og ljótleiki í því sem á yfirborðinu virðist vera fegurð. Dauðinn er ekki endilega ljótari en lífið. Emil upphefur lík

⁶¹ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 55.

⁶² „Floral Giants from Humble Beginnings“, vefsíða.

⁶³ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 86.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

stúlkunnar og sér fullkomnun í jarðnesku hulstrinu utan af henni, sem hann telur sig betur í stakk búinn til að hafa stjórn á en meðan hún lifði. Athyglisvert er að bera afstöðu Emils saman við vangaveltur Muggs Maístjörnu í *Hinu stórfenglega leyndarmáli Heimsins*: „Ég horfði í andlit líksins, hulstrið utan um það sem eitt sinn var Astrid Roberts; andlitið var hvítt og tómt, eins og stytta, eða líkt og það sem hefði eitt sinn gætt það manngleika væri þar ekki lengur[.]“⁶⁵ Þar sem Muggur sér tótleika finnur Emil fegurð. Honum virðast jafnvel mannleg samskipti taka á sig aðra mynd þegar dauðinn er nærri, „eins og dauðinn ljáði samskiptum einhverja mýkt og ljóma sem annars var með öllu fjarverandi í daglegu lífi.“⁶⁶

Líkt og í lýsingu Emils á samræðum hans við stelpuna stökkva hugsanakeðjur í bókum Steinars Braga oft í óvæntar áttir og setningabygging einkennist gjarnan af því; þessu þótti mér mikilvægt að koma til skila í þýðingunni. Hrynjandin í textanum getur breyst fyrirvaralaust. Dauðinn og einmanaleiki manneskjunnar minna hvað eftir annað á sig á óvæntum stöðum. Öll vitund um sjálfið leiðir óhjálvæmilega til vitundar um dauðann:

... og nálægt stefni Heimsins, við tóma laugina, greindi ég sjálfan mig og vissi að það sem ég hafði í einfeldni minni álitit fagurt, dýrlegt og upphafið, var ekki nema leiðin til dauðans og ég gat engu breytt. Ég vissi það. Og þegar ég lyfti aftur höfðinu var ég í myrkri; skipið var neðst í dimmum, viðbjóðslegum göngum er dýpkuðu, og langt, langt í burtu, við enda þeirra, var himinninn, bjart op í

⁶⁵ Steinar Bragi, *Hið stórfenglega leyndarmál Heimsins*, 71.

⁶⁶ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 68-69.

laginu eins og auga sem smækkaði – ég hvarf birtunni og sjálfum mér og svo var ekkert nema dauðinn ...⁶⁷

Þessi yfirpyrmandi vonleysistilfinning og skortur á raunverulegum tengslum við annað fólk eru gegnumgangandi stef í höfundarverki Steinars Braga, og birtast ekki síður í sjálfu umhverfinu. Reykjavík Steinars Braga er óralangt frá hinni flippuðu, fjörugu og sköpunarglöðu höfuðborg sem sjá má í landkynningu og „ímyndunarsköpun“ Íslands. Það verður seint hægt að selja helgarferðir út á bækur Steinars. Í þessari Reykjavík er einnar nætur gaman ekki til merkis um sprúðlandi hressleika eða lauslæti ljóshærðra og glæsilegra íslenskra kvenna, heldur enn ein tilraunin til að finna fyrir einhverju, ná einhverjum tengslum við aðra manneskju eða einfaldlega kæfa raunveruleikann enn frekar: „Ég skil ekki af hverju ég geri þetta. Ég hafði engan áhuga, samt var eins og þetta yrði að vera svona, einhvern veginn[,]“⁶⁸ segir stelpan eftir skyndikynni í partýi á Grettisgötu. Heiða í *Sólskinsfólkinu* reynir að „rifja ekki upp gærkvöldið og halda bara áfram og gleyma því líka að hún mundi allt sem hún gerði, sama hvað, og hún hafði viðbjóð á því.“⁶⁹

Reykjavík *Rafflesíublómsins* og annarra verka Steinars Braga er borg þar sem fólk deyr eitt og einmana án þess að nokkur grípi inn í. Fyrir opin á turnhúsi Hallgrímskirkju hafa verið „settir rimlar til að varna því að fólk [fremji] sjálfsmorð með því að henda sér fram af.“⁷⁰ Dauðinn er örþrifarád þeirra sem enga stjórn hafa og finna ekki fyrir neinu nema doða og vanlíðan. Auk sjálfsmorðsins í Sólfarinu segir stelpan sögu af kunningja

⁶⁷ Steinar Bragi, *Hið stórfenglega leyndarmál Heimsins*, 18.

⁶⁸ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 48.

⁶⁹ Steinar Bragi, *Sólskinsfólkið*, 18.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 158.

sínum sem reynir að fremja sjálfsmorð og er truflaður í misheppnaðri tilraun sinni af nággranna – fyrrum meðlimi hljómsveitarinnar GusGus – sem vill ræða við hann um „eitthvert algerlega smáskítlegt, ofurhversdagslegt drasl sem ekki nokkru máli skipti“,⁷¹ sem verður til þess að hengingin gleymist. Stelpan lýsir atvikinu sem „recreational sjálfsmorðstilraun“⁷²; fólk vilji í raun og veru ekki deyja heldur bara fá nasaprefinn eða eins konar forsmekk af dauðanum. Aftengingin frá veruleikanum er slík. Stelpan vill meina að svona verði dauðinn nálægur „þegar hann er gerður svona óraunverulegur, eins og er í nútímanum.“⁷³ Hún lýsir borginni sem svo: „En borgin sem við búum í er líka undirlögð af dauða, bældum eða upphöfnum.“⁷⁴ Martin fylgist aðgerðalaus með sjálfsmorði ókunnugs manns inn um glugga líkt og á sjónvarpsskjá; glerið á milli þeirra er glerið á milli þeirra sem borgina byggja. Þegar lík stúlkunnar hangir niður úr Sólfarinu hringja vegfarendur í neyðarlínuna til að láta vita af atvikinu en enginn nálgast hana, enginn reynir að ganga úr skugga um hvað raunverulega hafi gerst og hvort hægt sé að koma henni til hjálpar.

Í *Rafflesíublóminu* er borgin tákngevingur kuldans og aftengingarinnar; hún er líflaus en á sama tíma full af fólki sem þjáist eitt, veslast upp og deyr hægum dauðdaga. Umhverfið er álíka ómanneskjulegt og íbúð Evu í *Konum*. Í örvæntingarfullri tilraun til að breyta einhverju, koma sér aftur af stað, fer Emil í gönguferð „niður að Ægisíðunni, meðfram ströndinni langleiðina út í einhverja eyðimörk sex-akreina gatna, bílastæða og kringla sem hann vissi ekki einu sinni að væru til í þessari borg[.]“⁷⁵ Í þessu umhverfi er

⁷¹ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 26.

⁷² Ibid., 26.

⁷³ Ibid., 26.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 54.

ekkert sem Emil getur notfært sér til að koma sér aftur í samband við hið mannlega. Stórmarkaðurinn sem Emil verslar í er smækkuð útgáfa af borginni, kaldur, nútímalegur og undarlega mannlaus:

Af skyndilegri framtakssemi fór hann að versla og í stórmarkaðinn og sá enga aðra kúnna, ekki frekar en venjulega. Þegar hann fékk til baka hjá tvítugum strák á kassanum þakkaði hann fyrir sig, en strákurinn roðnaði og muldraði eitthvað í barminn. Emil varð vandræðalegur fyrir hönd þeirra beggja. Stelpan hafði rétt fyrir sér, það var eitthvað að í þessari borg. Þessi vesalings krakki sem vissi ekki hvernig átti að segja takk sömuleiðis eða verði þér að góðu var bara eins og útfærðari mynd af vandanum. Íslendingar voru þjóð unglunga sem höfðu ekki fullorðnast – hefðarlausir, frekir og gramir og ultu gervalla ævina frá einni hlið yfir á aðra, kjökrandi eða hlæjandi, án tengsla við sjálfa sig eða aðra, allar athafnir þeirra utan samhengis nema mögulega þess sem var mælanlegt í peningum – utan örlaga.⁷⁶

Þessi ádeila á íslenskt samfélag er undirstrikuð í orðum Martins, hins pólskættaða kunningja Emils sem kemst svo að orði um foreldra sína: „Og að tveir fátækir og þíndir Pólverjar skuli hafa meiri menningu í höfðinu á sér en heilt úthverfi í Reykjavík, heil íslensk millistétt, er leiðinlegt fyrir Íslendinga.“⁷⁷ Sjálfsmynd Íslendingsins er óljós og án tengsla við fortíðina; er eins og tákngervingur þeirrar sjálfsmyndarkrísu sem Cronin talar um að einkenni nútímamanninn sem í hringiðu tækniframfara og viðskiptavæðingar hefur tapað bæði tilfinningunni fyrir augnablikinu og hinu liðna.⁷⁸ Sömu afstöðu gætir í verkum Steinars Braga allt frá upphafi – á hápunkti íslenska „góðærisins“ komu *Áhyggjudúkkur* út og drógu upp mynd af aragrúa einmana, óhamingjusams fólks í nútímaborg þar sem er

⁷⁶ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 55.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁷⁸ Cronin, *Translation and Identity*, 3.

svo sannarlega eitthvað að; jafnvel þegar háski steðjar að er eins og fólk sé ófært um að tengjast raunveruleikanum. Þegar úlfahjarðir gera innrás í borgina er talað við „Davíð foringja“ sem gerir augu sín „góðlátlega umberandi og sliktu líkt og hann væri að ávarpa son sinn sem var að misskilja eitthvað dálítið.“ Fréttamaðurinn í myndveru brosir kankvíslega og segir: „Tsk. Tsk. Davíð alltaf góður[.]“⁷⁹ Í þessum heimi rekur fólk stefnulaust áfram, það ýmist kaupir innantómar hugmyndir um velgengni og hið æskilega, ellegar stendur ráðvillt utan við rammann. Kaldhæðnin sem yngri kynslóðirnar hafa brynjað sig með er orðin að vegg sem kemur í veg fyrir innlifun og samlíðan: „Heiða ... sagðist ekki lengur skilja muninn á til dæmis kaldhæðni og einhverju öðru eða hvað væri yfirleitt að gerast og skildi ekkert, raunverulega, nema staðreyndir“.⁸⁰ Jafnvel það fallega í umhverfinu kveikir kvíða og óhugnað: „Hún horfði út yfir Sundin, Esjuna og Snæfellsnesið. Sjórinn var lygn, jökullinn ljómaði í rauðu. Sorg og eitthvað sem líktist innilokunarkennd fyllti brjóst hennar.“⁸¹ Hin margrómaða íslenska náttúra er eins og í fjarlægum bakgrunni; fólkið sem í borginni býr lifir hvorki né hrærist í nánnum tengslum við straumfagra fossa og mosagrónar hliðar. Í *Rafflesíublóminu* er íslenska sveitin ekki upphafin heldur sett í samband við einmanaleika, ljótleika og misnotkun, líkt og á ljósmyndinni af Maríu á upptökuheimilinu í sveitinni: „[H]ún stóð úti á túni fyrir framan hvíta, tveggja hæða steinbyggingu; til hliðar við hana, ofan á gulleitri sinunni, lágu gaddavírsrúllur í hrúgu. Svipurinn á henni var skældur, hún var horuð og með bauga undir augunum.“⁸² María fær

⁷⁹ Steinar Bragi, *Áhyggjudúkkur*, 118.

⁸⁰ Steinar Bragi, *Sólskinsfólkið*, 44.

⁸¹ Steinar Bragi, *Konur*, 9.

⁸² Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 65.

engan kynngimagnaðan kraft úr íslenskri náttúru heldur er hún „[e]nn eitt stráið í íslensku auðninni.“⁸³ Þegar Emil leitar út á við veldur ferskt loftið honum líkamlegri vanlíðan.

Steinar Bragi framandgerir gjarnan hið kunnuglega; sú Reykjavík sem hann laðar fram er þekktanleg sem Reykjavík nútímans en engu að síður frá fyrstu stundu örlítið á skjön við okkar raunveruleika, dálítið skrumskæld, þar til raunveruleiki borgarinnar gliðnar samhliða textanum sjálfum. Þrátt fyrir að *Rafflesíublómið* sé ekki fantasúkennd eins og *Áhyggjudúkkur* eða *Sólskinsfólkið* verður svipað vitundarrof í sögunni. Við þekkjum kennileitin, þekkjum sérkenni borgarinnar, en inn í kunnugt landslag eru settir einkennilegir atburðir, brenglun og uppmagnaður sjúkleiki. *Áhyggjudúkkur* er líklega skýrasta dæmið um þessa meðhöndlun á Reykjavík, en við upphaf hvers kafla má sjá götukort sem sýnir staðsetningu atburðanna í viðkomandi kafla. Götukortin eru rétt og raunveruleg; þeim fylgja gjarnan ítarlegar skýringar sem staðsetja atburðina afar nákvæmlega í þekktu umhverfi:

Vettvangur 3. kafla. Lyfta í stigagangi; upp Laugaveg, til hægri upp Frakkastíg, Skólavörðuholt, niður Skólavörðustíg á gistiheimili um miðbik; niður Skólavörðustíg, til hægri niður Vegamótastíg, til hægri upp Laugaveg; Kaffi List; yfir Laugaveginn, port, aftur yfir; bókabúð MM, 1. hæð, bókaborð og afgreiðsluborð; sófi í neðsta kjallara.⁸⁴

Sögusviðið er þannig byggt á staðreyndum en því er gefinn annarlegur blær og súrrealísk innspýting. Hið hversdagslega verður óhugnanlegt; í *Sólskinsfólkinu* sér Heiða hjörð af þorskmönnum koma „rápandi úr Þingholtunum, niður Ingólfsstrætið.“⁸⁵ Spæjarinn Steinn

⁸³ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 66.

⁸⁴ Steinar Bragi, *Áhyggjudúkkur*, 30.

⁸⁵ Steinar Bragi, *Sólskinsfólkið*, 181.

Steinarr, skopstælingin á Sherlock Holmes í *Hinu stórfenglega leyndarmáli Heimsins*, er settur inn í íslenskt umhverfi og býr við Laugavegin. ⁸⁶ Reykjavíkumaraþonið er einn af miðpunktum *Sólskinsfólksins* en þessi árlegi viðburður í borgarlífinu fær á sig martraðarkenndan blæ: „Gatan fylltist af fólki, endanna á milli, sem streymdi fram hjá henni, andlitin gljáandi af svita, augun þanin og starandi og hún stóð hreyfingarlaus, horfði ofan í grasið við götuna og beið eftir að þetta endaði.“ ⁸⁷ Keppt er um skringilegasta búninginn og einn hlaupara hefur klætt sig í kafarabúning, sem er raunar mynd sem kemur einnig fyrir í *Hinu stórfenglega leyndarmáli heimsins* – búningurinn gerir þann sem honum klæðist ómennskan og fjarlægán, „eins og skrímli Frankensteins“. ⁸⁸ Fjölbýlishúsið þar sem hin látna býr í *Rafflesíublóminu* er síðan raunverulegt reykvískt hús sem við lestur sögunnar fær á sig óhugnanlega, táknræna merkingu.

Þessi framandgerving á kunnuglegu umhverfi hefur að sjálfsögðu ekki sama slagkraft þegar textinn er þýddur og síðan lesinn í öðru menningarsamfélagi. Engu að síður er sú kaldranalega nútímaborg sem birtist í *Rafflesíublóminu* sennilega kunnugleg mörgum erlendum lesendum í einhverri mynd. Sagan er skrifuð í litlu málsamfélagi og hægt að gera ráð fyrir því að þeir sem lesa frumtextann hafi (mismikla) þekkingu á staðháttum Reykjavíkurborgar. Höfundur hefur svigrúm til að gefa sér ákveðnar menningarlegar forsendur. Þegar kemur til kasta þýðandans er hann eins konar menningarlegur milligöngumaður, sem þarf að koma til skila upplýsingum sem eru gefnar í menningarlegu samhengi frumtextans. Þá er til að mynda átt við umhverfi, staðhætti,

⁸⁶ Steinar Bragi, *Hið stórfenglega leyndarmál Heimsins*, 7.

⁸⁷ Steinar Bragi, *Sólskinsfólkið*, 119-120.

⁸⁸ Steinar Bragi, *Hið stórfenglega leyndarmál Heimsins*, 262.

gildi og sjálfsmynd. Hlutverk þýðandans er að brúa bilið á einhvern hátt.⁸⁹ Landfræðilegt umhverfi textans er ef til vill sá þessara þátta sem hvað auðveldast er að koma auga á og greina. Mikilvægast er að þýðandi taki skýra og afdráttarlausa ákvörðun um það hvernig koma skal slíkum upplýsingum til skila, að hversu miklu leyti skuli útskýra þær, og haldi sig við sömu línu í verkinu öllu. Til samræmis við þá ákvörðun mína að opna textann fyrir erlendum lesendum en ganga ekki of langt í að brjóta hann upp með viðbótarupplýsingum kaus ég að halda útskýringum í lágmarki og reyna að fella þær snyrtilega inn í textann. Ég prófaði mig áfram með þetta – gekk í upphafi lengra en dró síðan úr, og það einn hinna bresku yfirlesara minna sérstaklega um að gera mér grein fyrir því hvort umhverfi textans hefði verið nægilega ljóst. Ég reyndi að gera textann þannig úr garði að lesandi sem ekki þekkir Reykjavík þyrfti ekki stöðugt að vera að klóra sér í höfðinu yfir því hvort um væri að ræða götu, hverfi eða tiltekinn stað. Eftir að hafa skoðað nokkrar aðrar þýðingar á íslenskum bókum kaus ég að láta götunöfn standa útskýringarlaus. Í öðrum tilfellum nægði yfirleitt að bæta við einu orði eða stuttri útskýringu („the Thingholt area“⁹⁰, „the Árbær area“⁹¹, „the painter Kjarval“⁹²), eða skipta út nákvæmri staðsetningu fyrir almennari þegar betur átti við, samanber „the 10-11 store in the city centre“⁹³ í staðinn fyrir „í Austurstræti.“⁹⁴ Það sama gerði ég þegar kom að öðrum sértækum fyrirbærum sem höfðu ekki sérstaka merkingu í textanum og mátti skipta út fyrir almennari hugtök, til

⁸⁹ Katan, *Translating Cultures*, 130.

⁹⁰ Steinar Bragi, *The Rafflesia Flower*, 5.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 70.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁹⁴ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 83.

að mynda varð tilvísun í Fréttablaðið að „the newspaper.“⁹⁵ Á öðrum stöðum gekk það hins vegar ekki upp og þá átti betur við að setja inn skýringu, samanber „Morgunbladið’s editorial board“.⁹⁶

Í lokakaflanum er að finna eina magnþrungnustu málsgrein textans, þegar Emil reynir að ná líkamlegum samruna við líkið af stúlkunni og vitund hans eins og víkkar út svo líkið verður táknmynd íslensks samfélags; í því skynjar Emil loksins umheiminn en það er firrtur og yfirborðskenndur heimur. Í þessum kafla er mýmargt sem skírskotar beint í íslenskt samfélag á ritunartímanum og ég þurfti þar af leiðandi að leggjast yfir hann, greina hann vandlega og skoða bæði hvert smáatriði sem og heildina. Þessi þrettán línu langa runa er hápunktur sögunnar og í raun hengiflugið sem Emil og lesandinn falla fram af niður í hin óvæntu sögulok. Það var líklega lán í óláni að á meðan sagan var í þýðingu skyldi „frægðarsól“ hins íslenska fjármálakerfis taka á sig jafn hörmulega mynd og raun bar vitni; þar af leiðandi eru fyrirbæri á borð við Kaupþing og Glitni, sem koma fyrir í upptalningunni, þekkt meðal erlendra lesenda og vekja eflaust sterk hugrenningatengsl. Tvær tilvísanir í Spaugstofuna klippti ég út eftir að hafa prófað ýmsar leiðir; flæði textans raskaðist mjög ef ég reyndi að útskýra tilvísunina á svipaðan hátt og staðhætti (t.d. „the Spaugstofa sketch show“) og ef ég þýddi hana einfaldlega sem „the weekly sketch show“ eða eitthvað ámóta var hin menningarlega tilvísun hvort eð var farin veg allrar veraldar. Það sem Spaugstofan táknaði í íslensku þjóðfélagi – og í skáldsögu eftir Steinar Braga – er gott dæmi um það hvernig hið menningarlega samhengi ljær slíkum tilvísunum aukna merkingu. Í þýðingunni fannst mér betra að taka hana alfarið út en reyna að klóra mig út

⁹⁵ Steinar Bragi, *The Rafflesia Flower*, 145.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

úr vandanum og eyðileggja þannig heildaráhrif þessa langa, samfellda texta. Hvað varðaði Kringluna, Mjóddina og Smáralind ákvað ég að fara sömu leið og með Fréttablaðið hér að ofan; hið sértæka var gert almennt: „[H]e ... thought about families on shopping trips to the various shopping centres“.⁹⁷ Að sjálfsögðu mun erlendur lesandi hafa aðra aðkomu að þessu textabroti en manneskja sem býr hér á landi, en því má ekki gleyma að textinn hefur ekki eina merkingu; hann vekur ekki endilega sömu hugrenningatengsl hjá tveimur lesendum þótt þeir séu báðir af sama þjóðerni. Katan vill skilgreina menningarsamfélag sem „sameiginlegt hugarlíkan eða –kort af heiminum“.⁹⁸ Það er þó talsverð einföldun á fyrirbærinu. Innan þess sem skilgreint er sem eitt menningarsamfélag rúmast jafnan aragrúi ólíkra „hugarlíkana“; tvær manneskjur sem búa hlið við hlið geta haft gjörólíkan skilning á heiminum og mismunandi viðmið. Þrátt fyrir að hugtakið menningarsamfélag sé vissulega oft nytsamleg mælistika má ekki beita því til að alhæfa um ætlaðan skilning eða hugrenningatengsl.

7. Greinarmerkjasetning

Íslensk greinarmerkjasetning er mun einfaldari en sú enska; hún er naumari og íslensk rithefð gefur mun minna svigrúm fyrir aukasetningar og flókna setningabyggingu. Þegar þýtt er úr ensku yfir á íslensku þarf gjarnan að „greiða úr“ málsgreinum til að þær skili sér nægilega skýrt á íslensku. Það var því viðbúið að bæta þyrfti inn talsvert miklu af greinarmerkjum þegar Rafflesíublómið var þýtt yfir á ensku. Til að mynda var sjálf

⁹⁷ Steinar Bragi, *The Rafflesia Flower*, 113.

⁹⁸ Katan, *Translating Cultures*, 17.

lokasetning sögunnar óslitin af greinarmerkjum á íslensku og hljóðaði svo: „Gegnum formið sem leysist upp og hverfur skín guð.“⁹⁹ Á ensku var ómögulegt annað en að bæta inn kommu, sem ljáði þó setningunni nokkuð fallegan blæ með stuttum andardrætti áður en síðustu orðin eru lesin: „Through the shape which dissolves and disappears, god shines.“¹⁰⁰ Þrátt fyrir að hefð sé fyrir því bæði á ensku og íslensku að rita orðið „Guð“ með stórum staf kaus ég að fylgja ákvörðun höfundarins í frumtextanum og hafa orðið með litlum staf. Það tákna ákveðna afstöðu til hugmyndarinnar um guð eða æðri mátt, og auk þess er ég sjálf höll undir þessa stafsetningu og hef notað hana á báðum málum. Víða annars staðar var ráðrúm til þess að fylgja frumtextanum nokkuð náið hvað greinarmerkjasetningu varðar; þegar ég mat það sem svo að flæðið í textanum væri undir því komið að halda greinarmerkjasetningu í lágmarki leyfði ég honum að renna áfram, svo fremi sem réttari greinarmerkjasetningu í ensku væri fylgt. Sérstaklega átti þetta við undir lok sögunnar þegar vitund aðalpersónunnar hefur gliðnað og takturinn í textanum breyst. Sem dæmi mætti nefna þessa málsgrein úr lokakaflanum:

Her eyes shone and gleamed and moved to and fro, she was teeming with quick little movements and he felt as if hot, smothering blood was surging through her face and colouring the sky red.¹⁰¹

Steinar Bragi notar skáletrun í nokkrum mæli í sögunni, til áherslu eða til að draga athygli að ákveðnum hugmyndum. Ég kaus að fylgja forskrift hans náið, fyrir utan nokkra staði þar sem áherslan var undarleg á ensku. Strax á fyrstu blaðsíðu kemur orðið „chosen“¹⁰² fyrir í skáletrun, sem leiðir lesandann í átt að hinu einkennilega hugarástandi

⁹⁹ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 90.

¹⁰⁰ Steinar Bragi, *The Rafflesia Flower*, 150.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 148.

¹⁰² Ibid., 65.

aðalpersónunnar Emils, sem ljær atburðum óeðlilega eða yfirdrífna merkingu í sínum þrönga, kyrrstæða heimi. Þar sem þessi hugmynd Emils er örlogavaldur í sögunni og markar vegferð hans þótti mér mikilvægt að halda áherslu höfundarins.

8. Bein ræða og hlutverk tungumálsins

Í sögunni er takmarkaður fjöldi persóna og fáir sem taka til máls aðrir en Emil, stúlkan og Martin, félagi Emils sem kemur til hans í næturheimsóknir og hjálpar honum á endanum við að grafa upp líkið af stúlkunni til að ganga úr skugga um að hún sé sú rétta. Þessi takmörkuðu samskipti eru táknræn fyrir þá einangrun sem Emil hefur áskapað sér. Emil á þó einnig í stuttum samræðum við aldraða ömmu hinnar látnu, húsvörðinn í húsi stúlkunnar svo og lögreglumanninn sem rannsakar dauðsfallið við Sólfarið. Útgangspunktur minn þegar kom að því að þýða samtöl og beina ræðu var að sambandið milli persóna væri skýrt sem og afstaða þeirra til viðmælandans, og auk þess að ákveðnum persónueinkennum væri haldið í orðavali, orðfæri og formlegheitum. Stærstur hluti samræðnanna í sögunni er á milli þeirra Emils og stelpunnar. Það var mikilvægt að málnotkun beggja félli að og styddi við persónusköpun höfundarins; það er kaldhæðnislegt að Emil sem á að sitja að ritgerðarskrifum og dæla út orðum skuli eiga jafn örðugt með að orða hugsanir sínar og raun ber vitni. Þrátt fyrir að hann fagni komu stúlkunnar inn í tilveru sína á hann erfitt með að halda þræðinum í samræðum þeirra, sem og þegar Martin heimsækir hann: „Hann varð þreyttur af svona löngum samræðum,

hugsanir hans tókust allar á loft og snerust hver um aðra.“¹⁰³ Hann heldur ekki í við þau stökk sem stelpa tekur:

Eftir á að hyggja fannst honum stefnan sem samræður þeirra tóku yfirleitt óskiljanleg, eins og þau færu á milli viðfangsefna af handahófi, samræðurnar ekkert nema lausir endar. Stelpa hafði lag á að taka strikið í einhverja átt sem virtist þvert á það sem hafði komið áður en var það í raun ekki. Oft fannst honum eins og hann væri á hlaupum á eftir henni, hversu timbruð og nývöknuð sem hún var, og leið eins og hann væri gamall og stirður, kannski af því hún virtist alltaf stefna beint að miðju hugsunar sinnar, talaði aldrei um neitt annað en innra byrði hlutanna, lógíkin framandleg og hljóp undan orðunum.¹⁰⁴

Hann talar í raun aðeins þegar hún þegir: „Hún var furðulega þögul þennan daginn, einhver kvíðaherpingur í andlitinu. Kannski var það þess vegna sem hann talaði svona mikið, eins og hann væri að rembast við að hressa hana.“¹⁰⁵ Þegar Emil síðan sest við skriftir kemur annað úr út því en hann ætlar sér og mesta fullnægju fær hann svo út úr því að brenna handritið, brenna orðin sem virðast aldrei endurspegla hann að nægilegu marki. Öfugt við hann notar stelpa orð til að koma reglu á eigin hugsanir; hún mátar sig við umhverfið með ögrandi fullyrðingum og stórum staðhæfingum, en missir stundum tökin og setningarnar eins og spýttast út úr henni:

„*Leiðinlegt*, öldur upp og niður, sjá þetta og hitt. Kynnast framandi popptónlist og ípodhulstrum í einhverri höfn sem er disneyland fyrir túrista. Útdauð menning undir glerkúlu – andskotinn hirði það allt.“¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 16.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

Í kjölfarið kúgast hún – orðin koma upp úr henni eins og ætandi gall. Emil lýsir gjörðum hennar síðar sem dramatískum, tillitslausum, fallegum og tilgerðarlegum.¹⁰⁷ Þessi stutta lýsing er í raun inntakið í persónu stelpunnar og fyrir þýðandann er hún lykill að persónunni. Stelpan notar tungumálið á sama hátt og Heiða í *Sólskinsfólkinu*; hún reynir að tala sig í samband við tilveruna og sjálfa sig. Viðmælandinn skiptir í raun litlu máli. Í *Sólskinsfólkinu* talar Heiða yfir hálfsofandi rekkjunaut, lætur dæluna ganga um fortíð sína þrátt fyrir að enginn sé að hlusta: „Strákurinn sagði eitthvað sem hún skildi ekki og hún ýtti í hann með löppinni og sagði honum að hann mætti ekki sofna en hann svaraði ekki. Hún reykti og hélt áfram að tala.“¹⁰⁸ Sú firring og aftenging sem er ríkjandi í skáldskap Steinars Braga birtist einnig í því hversu illa fólk nær saman í samræðum; gjarnan er fólk að tala um sitt hvorn hlutinn, það hlustar ekki eða skilur ekki hinn aðilann. Lýsing undarlegu, stareygðu konunnar í *Áhyggjudúkkum* á neðansjávarhávaða dregur þetta stef saman í hnotskurn:

„Í dag er svo mikill neðansjávarhávaði að hvalir og höfrungar og sjávardýr, sem tala saman með hátíðnihljóðum, geta ekki talað saman lengur, til dæmis gefið frá sér ástarköll, til að elska hvort annað, þau hrópa langt yfir hafið á hvort annað. Einu sinni gat hvalur eða höfrungur kallað á hval hinum megin á hnettinum en eftir að allt fylltist af hávaða þurfa þeir að fara næstum því ofan í hver annan til að heyra, í nokkurra metra fjarlægð, en finna kannski engan og þess vegna eru eiginlega sjávardýr alein í hafinu, þau synda alein um djúpið í hafinu og geta ekki elskað neinn og deyja alein, skríða bara ofan í einhverja holu og drepast og –“¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 58.

¹⁰⁸ Steinar Bragi, *Sólskinsfólkið*, 69.

¹⁰⁹ Steinar Bragi, *Áhyggjudúkkur*, 183.

Í þessu textabroti – sem á eins vel við manneskjurnar í sögum Steinars Braga og sjávardýrin – birtist sú sýn á hið mannlega ástand sem gegnsýrir skáldskap höfundarins. Fírringin er slíkt – hávaðinn er slíkur – að nútímamaðurinn er kominn úr tengslum við annað fólk, við umhverfi sitt og sína eigin skynjun. Hann syndir aleinn um djúp heimsins og deyr aleinn. Einmanaleg tilvera Emils er þessu marki brennd; þrátt fyrir að hann gleðjist yfir komu stelpunnar ná þau aldrei saman í raun nema eitt og eitt andartak. Orðaflaumur stelpunnar skolast yfir Emil sem nær aldrei að tala sig til móts við hana. Jafnvel þegar hann finnur sig knúinn til að koma einhverju mikilvægu í orð kemur upp veggur milli hans og umheimsins, eins og þegar hann situr hjá ömmu hinnar látnu: „Honum datt í hug að spyrja af hverju þau hefðu látið hana frá sér, hvað fengi fólk til að senda barn frá sér út í sveit í hendur ókunnugra, en hann fann doðann koma yfir sig.“¹¹⁰ Hann getur ekki útskýrt samband sitt við stelpuna fyrir Martin og ákveður „að hætta að reyna að segja það sem var ekki hægt að segja.“¹¹¹ Í skáldskap Steinars Braga missa jafnvel orðsins menn á borð við Mugg Maístjörnu tökin á tungumálinu þegar mikið liggur við og eitthvað frumstæðara tekur yfir: „Meðan við spásseruðum varð ég óðamála og mögulega samhengislaus, líkt og ég réði ekki við blóðið sem vöðvar fótleggja minna kusu að koma á hreyfingu og sumpart upp í höfuð mér.“¹¹² Tungumálið bregst; það er ekki það samskiptatæki sem því er ætlað að vera.

Flæðið og takturinn í því sem stelpan segir er allt annars eðlis en hjá Emil. Eins og Steiner bendir á liggur kjarni málsins í tónblæ textans; þegar saman koma lykilorð og

¹¹⁰ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 66.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹¹² Steinar Bragi, *Hið stórfenglega leyndarmál Heimsins*, 161.

tungutak sem eru efsta byrðið á merkingar- og siðfræðilegu gildi.¹¹³ Afstaða persónanna til umheimsins kemur fram í ræðu þeirra og orðavali, ekki síður þegar persónurnar segja ekki satt eða ná ekki að orða hugsun sína. Viðbrögð annarra persóna eru síðan túlkun eða þýðing á þessum orðum, innan ramma sögunnar. Steiner vill raunar nota þýðingarhugtakið um það ferli sem fer í gang í hvert sinn sem manneskja tekur við talboðum frá annarri manneskju.¹¹⁴ Þannig er bein ræða drifkraftur í sögunni og enn fremur það sem ósagt er. Emil kemst að því þegar stelpan hverfur að þrátt fyrir allar þeirra löngu samræður hefur hún nánast ekkert látið uppi um eigið líf; hún notar ekki samtölin til að koma á framfæri beinum upplýsingum um sjálfa sig heldur til að velta upp spurningum, prófa hugmyndir, kalla fram viðbrögð í því augnamiði að reyna að ná sambandi við umheiminn. Í samræðum þeirra er Emil hlustandi; hann er stuttur og velur sér hversdagslegri, lágstemmdari orð en hún. Oft eru viðbrögð hans orðlaus frekar en færð í orð; hann hristir höfuðið, kveikir sér í sígarettu, hugsar en segir fátt. Síðar gerir hann jafnvel hennar orð að sínum, eins og hann geti ekki sjálfur fundið orð yfir upplifun sína; líki hennar lýsir hann sem „*bjarmandi, þögul[li] hrið*“¹¹⁵ sem er lýsing stúlkunnar sjálfar á líki í kistu. Frásagnarmátinn er þétt samofinn persónu og vitund Emils og endurspeglar það rof sem smám saman verður í skynjun hans; um leið og Emil missir tökin á raunveruleikanum fer lesandinn að missa tökin á raunveruleika textans.

Samræður Emils og Martins eru einnig fyrirferðarmiklar í sögunni. Martin á pólska foreldra en hefur alist upp á Íslandi frá tveggja ára aldri; engu að síður finnst Emil alltaf

¹¹³ Steiner, *After Babel*, 10.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 48.

¹¹⁵ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 81.

eitthvað framandi við Martin, sem er eins konar áhorfandi að íslensku samfélagi, stendur utan við hið almenna og venjubundna líkt og Emil, en á meðvitaðan hátt sem veldur honum engu hugarangri. Martin vakir á nóttunni líkt og Emil, hann horfir inn um glugga og grípur ekki inn í það sem við honum blasir – jafnvel ekki þegar um er að ræða sjálfsmorðstilraun – en hann virðist öfugt við Emil hafa valið sér sína eigin tilveru. Emil veltir því fyrir sér hvort hann sjálfur hafi raunverulega valið einhverja leið eða hvort hann hafi bara flotið áfram, hann bíður eftir því að verða valinn – í stað þess að velja sjálfur – en Martin er gerandi. Þrátt fyrir að hann hjálpi Emil við uppgröftinn á líkinu virðist hann ávallt hafa stjórn á eigin hegðun og hann sogast ekki inn í hina hrynjandi veröld félaga síns. Emil hugsar um hann sem pólskan kunningja sinn¹¹⁶ og skammast sín fyrir að geta ekki litið á Martin sem Íslending – honum finnst óþægilegt að hann skuli tengja framandleikann við þjóðerni. Martin er mikill besservisser og skellir fram stórum staðhæfingum um heimspekilegar spurningar; upp úr honum vellur orðaflaumur sem virðist engu að síður ígrundaðri og yfirvegaðri en vangaveltur stelpunnar. Hún er stöðugt að hugsa upphátt; Martin er að færa í orð það sem hann hefur lengi velt fyrir sér. Ég reyndi að gæta þess að orðaforði Martins væri mikill og bæri þess merki að hann læsi mikið; hann er suga á upplýsingar og Emil tekur sérstaklega fram að hann hafi gott vald á tungumálinu. Hann er á stundum nokkuð forn í máli og skýtur enn fremur inn fræðilegum hugtökum og stórum orðum á borð við „sublimation“, „avoidance“, „the collective and passive“, „participation by proxy“.¹¹⁷ Í ræðu Martins birtist einnig öryggi hans og fullvissa. Öfugt við Emil á hann auðvelt með að henda reiður á hugsunum sínum. Hann veit hvað honum finnst og hann

¹¹⁶ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 11.

¹¹⁷ Steinar Bragi, *The Rafflesia Flower*, 71.

kemur því í orð. Fullvissu hans er teflt fram gegn óvissu Emils í öllum þeirra samræðum. „Þetta er *satt*, ekki kenning,“¹¹⁸ segir Martin eftir að hafa útskýrt kenningar sínar um mannskepnuna fyrir félagu sínum. Þrátt fyrir að Martin fljúgi stundum ansi hátt í samtölum þeirra gætti ég þess að hafa samræður með óformlegu sniði eins og við átti. Emil og Martin virðast hafa þekkt í einhvern tíma, líklega frá því að Emil flutti inn í íbúð afa síns á Ljósvallagötunni, en í sögunni kemur fram að þar hafi hann búið í nokkra mánuði. Innlit Martins á nóttunni eru þegar sagan hefst eini fasti punkturinn í annars óljósri tilveru Emils. Samskipti þeirra hafa þar af leiðandi tekið á sig ákveðið form og þeir þekkjast nægilega vel til að eiga nokkuð óformlegt spjall.

Þau samskipti sem stuða Emil hvað mest eru yfirheyrslan hjá lögreglunni. Miðaldra rannsóknarlögreglumaður ræðir við Emil um samband hans við stúlkuna og hæðist að honum, gerir lítið úr stúlkunni og slær hann hvað eftir annað út af laginu með ágengnum spurningum og hæðnislegum athugasemdum. Emil dofnað upp; enn og aftur bregðast orðin honum og hann sem ætlaði upphaflega að grafast fyrir um málsatvikin gerir fátt annað en að svara spurningum lögreglumannsins með stuttum setningum. Lögreglumaðurinn hefur fremur groddalegan og stuttaralegan talanda, hann er vanur því að vera í valdastöðu gagnvart þeim sem hann talar við og hann er auk þess eldri en Emil. Talsmáti hans í þýðingunni litaðist því helst af þessum þáttum. Amma hinnar látnu og húsvörðurinn eru sömuleiðis af annarri kynslóð en Emil, Martin og stelpan; orðaval ömmunnar gerði ég ívið varfærnislegara og hefðbundnara. Hún notar formleg orð á borð við „presume“,¹¹⁹ „the children’s home“¹²⁰ og „harassed“,¹²¹ sem hún í fyrstu hefur um þá

¹¹⁸ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 16.

¹¹⁹ Steinar Bragi, *The Rafflesia Flower*, 125.

kynferðislegu misnotkun sem hún telur líklegt að dótturdóttirin hafi orðið fyrir. Þegar texti er skoðaður vandlega má finna nytsamlega lykla í beinni ræðu persónanna; í þessu tilviki er það ræða ömmunnar um misnotkunina sem sýnir aldur hennar og varfærni. Hér er á ferð manneskja sem segir frekar of lítið en of mikið.

„I think she was harassed,“ she then said, looking hard at the wall in front of her. „At the home ... Abused, as they say these days. Did she ever mention anything to you? It’s hard when you can’t ever be sure ...“¹²²

Þegar persónugalleríð er jafn smátt og raun ber vitni í *Rafflesíublóminu* skiptir máli að þýðandinn – líkt og höfundurinn – geri sitt besta til að draga fram sérstöðu hvers og eins; styðji við persónusköpunina með meðvituðum ákvörðunum.

9. Óvissa, upplausn og gliðnun

Sú óvissa sem sögulokin vekja endurspeglast mjög í texta og stíl sögunnar; atburðir eru véfengdir, frásagnir persóna óáreiðanlegar. Stelpan reynir vísvitandi að búa til óvissu, til dæmis með því að segja Emil ekki nafn sitt; Emil hefur aftur á móti enga þörf fyrir sýndaróvissu þar sem hann nær aldrei að festa hönd á veruleikanum. Hann á engin skýr svör, ekki einu sinni við grundvallarspurningum um sjálfan sig. Hann veit ekki hvers vegna hann erfði íbúð afa síns, veit ekki hvers vegna stelpan endaði hjá honum, veit ekki hvers vegna hann er innilokaður í þessari kyrrstæðu veröld. Staða hans gagnvart stelpunni er

¹²⁰ Steinar Bragi, *The Rafflesia Flower*, 125.

¹²¹ Ibid., 125.

¹²² Ibid., 125.

óljós; þegar hann heimsækir ömmu hinnar látnu kynnir hann sig sem kærasta en veit að það er ekki rétta hugtakið. Óvissan einkennir meira að segja dauðann – frá upphafi er Emil ekki viss um að stelpa hafi verið sú sem hengdi sig í Sólfarinu, málsatvik öll eru óljós og jafnvel uppi hugmyndir um morð, það eru gloppur í frásögninni og óvissa Emils eykst þegar hann skoðar myndir af hinni látnu og reynir að tengja þær við stelpuna sem heimsótti hann. Stíll höfundarins kyndir undir þessari óvissu sem smitar út frá sér til lesandans. Þegar rýnt er í skáldsögur Steinars Braga kemur í ljós að sú veruleikagliðnun sem verður í *Rafflesíublóminu* – þetta martraðarkennda niðurbrot á vitund Emils sem og raunveruleikaskyni lesandans – er einnig til staðar í öðrum verkum hans. Þessi gliðnun á sér líka hliðstæður í táknmyndum textans; stelpa lýsir því hvernig fórnarlömb moskítóflugunnar „leysast upp í vængjaða blóðdropa og svífa burt“, „börn, bankamenn, hórur og listamenn“.¹²³ Allt stefnir í átt að niðurbroti, eiginlegu sem og óeiginlegu, enda vísar sjálf lokasetning sögunnar í upplausn líkamans: „Í gegnum formið sem leysist upp og hverfur skín guð.“¹²⁴ Emil er heltekinn af þeirri hugmynd að allt taki enda, „allt hvarf, molnaði, grotnaði, fauk burt, allir dóu“.¹²⁵ Stelpa talar um að vilja forðast þau örlög að leysast smám saman upp í kyrrstæðri tilveru; í stað þess að lenda á flóttu undan sjálfri sér segist hún frekar vilja deyja strax.

Í skáldsögum Steinars Braga hefst frásögnin gjarnan í tiltölulega kunnuglegri veröld með lögmálum sem eru ekki sérlega frábrugðin lögmálum hversdagsleikans, en smám saman er eins og myndin brenglist, fari á skjön við veruleikann. Loks er fótunum algjörlega

¹²³ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 32.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

kippt undan lesandanum. Sjónarhornið í textanum ýmist þrengist eða víkkar gífurlega; í lokakafla *Rafflesíublómsins* fylgir lesandinn Emil sem sér „gatið í miðju alls og lét sig hverfa um það, sveif um loftið eins og laufblað, óljóst muldur, visnað form“¹²⁶ áður en hann rennur saman við líkið af stúlkunni; því næst færast sjónarhornið upp í gluggann í herberginu meðan Emil horfir niður á stelpuna fyrir framan Sægreifann, þrengist um leið og hann kemur út þannig að það eru smáatriðin sem við fáum að sjá, fituperlur á skál, augnviprur og litlar hreyfingar í andliti. Svo er aftur skipt um sjónarhorn út frá skynjun Emils: „Allar minningarnar rifjuðust upp í einum punkti sem ætlaði að þenja sig yfir heiminn eða þann litla – ógurlega, pínlega litla hluta hans sem hann sá kringum sig – fylla allt.“¹²⁷ Undir lok *Sólskinsfólksins*, þegar einhvers slags sjávarmenni hafa tekið yfir Reykjavík samtímans, upplifir Heiða eins konar skynrof þegar hún áttar sig á því hversu lítil tengsl og takmarkaðan skilning hún hefur á hinum efnislega heimi:

Þegar rafmagnið fór af borginni uppgötvaði hún hvernig heimurinn var henni óskiljanlegur; hún skildi ekkert, einföldustu hlutir voru fáránlegir – ljósapera, brauðrist, eldunarhella, kaffikanna, virkni þeirra varð eitthvað sem ævintýri eða biblíur voru skrifaðar um og þessi vanmáttur hennar gagnvart hlutunum breiddi úr sér og það síðasta sem tilheyrði einfaldleikanum í lífi hennar hvarf – bollar, flöskur, glös, kveikjarar, sígarettur, allt var þetta á einhvern hátt fáránlegt og dautt og í stöðugt örvæntingarfyllri tilraunum hennar til að hrista líf í hlutina fór hún smám saman að hverfa og niðurinn, eins og frá fossi, lagðist yfir heiminn.¹²⁸

Draumar Muggs Maístjörnu í síðasta hluta *Hins stórfenglega leyndarmáls Heimsins* eru einnig dæmi um þessa skynbreytingu og útvíkkun á sjónarhorni; geimfarinn Buzz Aldrin

¹²⁶ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 85-86.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 89.

¹²⁸ Steinar Bragi, *Sólskinsfólkið*, 184.

hugsar í draumi hans „um allt fólkið og undraðist hversu ótrúlega miklu fleiri manneskjur væru á jörðinni en þær sem væru að horfa á útsendinguna í sjónvarpinu af þeim að ganga á tunglinu“¹²⁹. Eva í *Konum* er fljót að missa tökin á eigin skynjun í þeirri martröð sem hún lendir í við komuna til Reykjavíkur, en nágrannakona hennar hefur snemma orð á því hversu erfitt Eva eigi með að greina mörkin á milli hins raunverulega og óraunverulega: „Þú hefur ekki sérlega sterkt veruleikaskyn, sýnist mér ... Það er stutt í að hlutirnir leysist upp í kringum þig“.¹³⁰ Undir lok sögunnar er engin leið að átta sig á því hvað er ímyndun, draumur, veruleiki eða skynvilla:

Stundum fannst henni eins og allt sem gerðist eða hefði gerst væri hvergi nema inni í henni sjálfri. Á tímabili fannst henni hún vera í annarri íbúð, kringlóttri sem rúllaði niður fjall. Hún hentist milli margra íbúða, var í þeim öllum á sama tíma. Hún gerði aldrei neitt. Hún sveif í miðri stofunni, miðju svefnherberginu, eða hékk niður úr loftinu við enda rúmsins, sjónarhornið niður og í vegginn, horfði á sig fölna, sléttast, hverfa í vegginn. Hún var sjónarhorn.¹³¹

Þessi upplausn er af sama meiði og sú sem einkennir síðasta hluta *Rafflesíublómsins*. Persónur sem aldrei hafa staðið sérlega föstum fótum í tilverunni renna inn í annað ástand, aðra vitund. Það sama gerist rétt fyrir sögulok í *Áhyggjudúkkum* þegar persónan Egill missir stjórn á eigin skynjun:

Allt í kring streymdi fólk og Egill átti erfitt með gang: meðvitundin sem fór í hægri fótinn virtist hafa smitast út í þann vinstri líka og hann var með skó utan á fótunum, og öll þessi meðvitund – göngulagið, hvernig þessi yfirleitt áreynslulausa hreyfing fótanna og lappanna upp og áfram – löpp fyrir löpp, hvor á eftir annarri – var samansett úr aragrúa fínlegra og nákvæmlega tímasettra

¹²⁹ Steinar Bragi, *Hið stórfenglega leyndarmál Heimsins*, 270.

¹³⁰ Steinar Bragi, *Konur*, 25.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

hreyfinga vöðva sem unnu gegn og með um liðamót brjósk sínar bein hæla tær sköflung lærlegg mjaðmagrind og gátu auðveldlega mistekist og í framhaldi skildi hann ekki hver gekk, hver samhæfði þessar hreyfingar og var að baki þessu öllu og þetta hjarta sem sló bank – bankbank – bank og blóðið út aðalstagæð og stöðuþrýstingur í blóðinu aflokað kerfi æðanna og blóðið upp hálsinn í heila út hendur og niður baklægt í líffærin [...] bein, fita, svitakirtlar, æðar, taugar, húð, sínar, liðir, hár og augnkúlur og hann, *Egill*, eins og *innan* í¹³²

Egill verður skyndilega meðvitaður um hverja einingu líkama síns og hættir að geta séð heildina, sem minnir á „uppljómun“ Emils sem eins og finnur fyrir einingum íslensks samfélags í gegnum líkið af stúlkunni. Vitund Emils er varpað út á við í gegnum líkið og landslag þess verður hið íslenska landslag.

Í *Konum* er talað um skynheildarskipti sem lokapunktur „ferlis sem miðaði að því að fólk áttaði sig á að gamalt viðmið – eitt af þeim miðlægu er bundið hefðu saman hversdaginn, jafnvel líf þess allt – stæðist ekki lengur, væri horfið, og tómið sem eftir stæði héldi bara áfram að *tæma* nema nýtt viðmið kæmi í staðinn“.¹³³ Aðalpersónur Steinars Braga eru fastar í þessu sama tómi.

10. Tími, sagnorð og samspil hugsunar og tungumáls

Innri tími sögunnar og afstaða til tíma stjórnast mikið til af notkun sagnorða. Í raun þótti mér í því tilliti auðveldara að þýða úr íslensku yfir á ensku en öfugt; í ensku er gjarnan notast við lýsingarhátt nútíðar sem á sér ekki nothæfa samsvörun í íslenskri málhefð

¹³² Steinar Bragi, *Áhyggjudúkkur*, 193-194.

¹³³ Steinar Bragi, *Konur*, 62.

nema að takmörkuðu leyti. Hann vill því þvælast fyrir þýðendum sem þýða úr ensku, en er nauðsynlegt tæki þegar þýtt er úr íslensku yfir á ensku, þar eð hann getur til að mynda táknað þrátekningu eða lengri tíma. Þar sem við notum einfalda þátíð nægir hún oft ekki til á ensku heldur verður að beita lýsingarhætti nútíðar eða nota hjálparsagnir, eins og sjá má dæmi um í eftirfarandi klausu úr *Rafflesíublóminu*:

He stopped doing everything. He'd stand by the window, make coffee or walk around the flat; switch the radio on or off, make coffee and drink it; make the most of utterly trivial actions: brushing his teeth for half an hour, spending an hour shaving, bursting into sudden laughter at a perching bird sitting on a branch in the cemetery.¹³⁴

Tíðir sagnorða eru afskaplega stór þáttur í því hvernig við skynjum tímann; framtíð, fortíð og nútíð, varanleika, endanleika, hið mögulega. Sagnorð skýra tímaás sögu. Líkt og Steiner segir eru það engir Whorfískir draumórar að halda því fram að notkun okkar á tíma markist aðallega af málfræðilegri uppbyggingu viðkomandi sagnar. Ólík menningarsamfélög virðast notast við og lifa í ólíkum skilningi á tíma eða í það minnsta hafa mismunandi hugmyndir um hann.¹³⁵ Tungumálið er tæki sem við notum til að orða hugsun okkar, setja atburði í samhengi, eiga samskipti hvert við annað. Hvort sem maður gengst inn á Sapir-Whorf-kenninguna um tungumálið sem algjört mótunarafl skilnings eður ei hlýtur það að liggja í augum uppi að það hvernig hugsun okkar og umhverfi er fært í orð á móðurmáli okkar (og þeim málum sem við síðar lærum) er ekki einstefnuferli. Hugsunin mótar málið, málið hugsunina. Hin svokallaða vægari útgáfa af Sapir-Whorf-kenningunni gengur út á það að málfræði geri merkingu mögulega og setji enn fremur

¹³⁴ Steinar Bragi, *The Rafflesia Flower*, 112.

¹³⁵ Steiner, *After Babel*, 137.

skorður við merkingunni. Málfræðileg uppbygging tungumáls afmarkar það svæði sem við höfum til að setja á svið hið menningarlega sjálf.¹³⁶ Í þýðingarferlinu reyndi ég að gæta þess að raska ekki tímaás sögunnar og hafa mállega afstöðu til tíma mjög skýra.

11. Orðaleikir og tvíræðni

Í textanum er ekki mikið um orðaleiki eða tvíræð orð. Í fjórða kafla eiga þó Emil og stelpan langt samtal um moskítóflugur og stelpunni verður tíðrætt um „ranann“ á þeim. Emil kemur með hæðnislegt innskot um að stelpur séu vanar því að láta stinga inn í sig rana. Í þýðingunni ákvað ég að nota orðið „pricks“, sem hefur tvíræða merkingu og bætir raunar þriðja merkingarsviðinu við.

„I picture their pricks having just come out of a rat or a dead dog before entering me ...“

[...]

„I thought women were used to it,“ Emil said.

„Used to what?“

„Being penetrated by pricks.“¹³⁷

Á næstu blaðsíðu þýði ég síðan orðið „karlpungur“ sem „prick“, sem undirstrikar enn frekar samlíkingu Emils.

Ég lenti skiljanlega í nokkru basli með setninguna „*Reykjavík – byggð af vanefnum úr þakefnum*“¹³⁸ en gat snúið mig út úr því með því að púsla saman annars konar orðaleik

¹³⁶ Katan, *Translating Cultures*, 74.

¹³⁷ Steinar Bragi, *The Rafflesia Flower*, 89.

¹³⁸ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 73.

út frá orðinu „corrugated“: „Reykjavík – made of corrugated iron by incorrigible people.“¹³⁹ Þarna er merkingin ekki sú sama en hæðnistónninn kemst til skila sem og uppspretta setningarinnar, það er að segja orðanna hljóðan.

12. Viðtökur

Á því rúma ári sem liðið er frá því þýðingin kom fyrst fyrir sjónir annarra hefur mikið vatn runnið til sjávar og verkefnið reynst mikil lyftistöng fyrir mig sem þýðanda. Í kjölfar þess að umboðsmaður Steinars Braga í Norður-Ameríku fékk handritið í hendurnar var þýðingin birt í fyrrnefndu bókmenntatímariti, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, og hlaut góðar viðtökur. Fyrir hvatningu Steinars tók ég þátt í þýðingasamkeppni Susan Sontag-stofnunarinnar í New York, en árið 2010 var keppnin opin ungum þýðendum sem þýða úr Norðurlandamálum yfir á ensku. Fyrir *The Rafflesia Flower* hlaut ég svokallað „honorable mention“, eða eins konar aukaverðlaun, og varð þannig í raun í öðru sæti á eftir sigurvegaranum Benjamin Mier-Cruz.¹⁴⁰ Þar með voru efasemdir mínar um að geta þýtt yfir á annað mál en mitt móðurmál endanlega jarðaðar. Eftir að úrslit keppninnar voru tilkynnt hef ég fengið fleiri þýðingarverkefni úr íslensku yfir á ensku, og einnig hafa forsprakkar Susan Sontag-stofnunarinnar boðist til að aðstoða mig við að koma mér á framfæri í bandaríska útgáfubransanum. Eitt helsta markmið mitt með meistaranámi í þýðingafræði var að öðlast reynslu og tækifæri til að geta starfað sem þýðandi íslenskra bókmennta. Verkefni þetta hefur því reynst mér afskaplega happadriúgt.

¹³⁹ Steinar Bragi, *The Rafflesia Flower*, 131.

¹⁴⁰ „The Susan Sontag Prize for Translation 2010 Winners“, vefsíða.

13. Lokaorð

Steinar Bragi er einn af fremstu höfundum íslenskra samtímabókmennta og því á skáldskapur hans fullt erindi út fyrir landsteinana. Þrátt fyrir að þýðingar eigi almennt undir högg að sækja á hinum enskumælandi bókamarkaði tel ég grundvöll fyrir því að koma góðum skáldskap á framfæri, ekki síst á því fagurbókmenntasviði sem best rækt er lögð við af háskólaforlögum og bókmenntatímaritum. Við þýðinguna á *Rafflesíublóminu* reyndi ég að gæta þess að halda í höfundareinkenni Steinars og skapa texta sem afneitaði ekki eigin framandleika en væri engu að síður aðgengilegur enskumælandi lesendum. Sá tími sem mér gafst til greiningarvinnu og lestrar var ómetanlegur og gerði verkefni þetta ólíkt öðrum þýðingarverkefnum sem ég hef unnið. Hvert skref var afar lærdómsríkt. Eins og rakið var hér að ofan er þýðing ávallt túlkun – óhjákvæmilega er þýðing mín á sögunni lituð mínum skilningi á textanum og mínum áherslum, hversu meðvitaðar eða ómeðvitaðar sem þær annars kunna að vera. Það sem heillar mig við heim sögunnar er sá samruni ljótleika og fegurðar sem er aðal höfundarins; viðkvæmi strengurinn inni í harkalegri, kaldranalegri tilveru. Sú tilfinning sem verk Steinars Braga vekja í brjósti mér er ekki ólík þeim hughrifum sem Emil upplifir í *Rafflesíublóminu* þegar honum finnst hann hafa náð tengslum við stúlkuna, „tilfinningu sorgar og fegurðar sem var svo sterk að hann átti bággt með að hugsa um hana.“¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Steinar Bragi, *Rafflesíublómið*, 52.

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ÞAKKIR

Ég vil þakka leiðbeinanda mínum við Háskóla Íslands, Gauta Kristmannssyni, fyrir hvatningu og innblástur í náminu. Þau Dan og Bryony Spencer í Glasgow, Deanne Bott í Leicester, Rebecca Jackson í Liverpool og Kate Williams í Howden lásu yfir hluta þýðingarinnar á mismunandi stigum málsins og veittu góð ráð. Einnig vil ég þakka þeim Silju Aðalsteinsdóttur og Valgerði Benediktsdóttur hjá Forlaginu fyrir góða samvinnu og nytsamlegar upplýsingar. Stærstu þakkirnar fær þó Steinar Bragi fyrir að treysta mér fyrir Rafflesíublóminu.

II. hluti

THE RAFFLESIA FLOWER – þýðing úr íslensku

The Rafflesia Flower

A novella by Steinar Bragi

Translation by Salka Gudmundsdottir, 2011

Chapter 1

He was standing by the window looking outside. Now that he came to think of it, it had probably been snowing for a few weeks – an incessant all-day snowfall, not just the occasional comma here and there but proper snowflakes; podgy, glowing with whiteness, filling the world with their stillness and silence.

He'd been living there on Ljósvallagata for some months, in a second floor flat facing out to Hólavallakirkjugardur, the cemetery by Sudurgata. During all that time he'd hardly left the house at all. Originally he'd come to gather up his grandfather's belongings, settle the estate, but once that was done he'd started to write an essay, moved in a few boxes of books and begun looking out the window, sometimes for days on end. For weeks he met no one, except he sometimes had coffee with an acquaintance of his, a Pole who picked worms in the surrounding gardens. This was a self-imposed solitude, he could break out of it whenever he wanted to, pick up the phone or take a walk and knock on someone's door – his friends were never more than a few minutes away.

But he never went anywhere, never picked up the phone or knocked on anyone's door. He was alone and would need to be alone for a while, possibly for a long time. The reason he gave himself was that he needed privacy to finish the essay, yet he spent nowhere near the entire day writing – not sixteen hours, some days no time at all, and now months had passed and he still didn't have more than a fraction of what he needed to finish. Was he going to spend months of his life in solitude in order to finish an essay?

Sometimes he felt as if the solitude he had so harshly brought upon himself had to stem from some other reason, as if something was about to happen – fairly vague, but it involved the idea he would somehow be *chosen*.

And late one Friday night the wait came to an end. Emil was lying on the sofa reading about “the little death”, as research for a chapter of the essay, when someone rang the doorbell. The buzzing rang loudly through the quiet flat and his heart pounded anxiously as he hurried through the living room and over to the kitchen window. He thought it must be someone coming home from a night on the town, who’d pressed the wrong doorbell, and what he saw down on the pavement seemed to confirm this: a shadow against the newly-fallen, glowing snow, sort of sagging sideways into the buzzers, having probably bumped a shoulder on his buzzer by accident.

He decided to ignore it, to not make his presence known but simply wait for the person to bugger off or stumble upon the right buzzer. But the ringing went on until Emil could no longer stand the noise, hurried downstairs and opened the door.

“Cold,” the shadow slurred, walked past him and began to climb or sort of crawl up the stairs ahead of him, looking like a large dog. It was a girl, carefully wrapped in a scarf and hat, a small rucksack on her back. He ran after her and asked what she was doing. She gave no reply and he decided to humour her and follow her up the stairs rather than kick up a fuss out there.

When they came into the hall she straightened up for long enough to take off the rucksack and coat and kick off her shoes. Again he asked what she was doing there and she muttered something about names – beautiful names, names that inspired trust,

something to do with the names on the buzzer. She then lurched into the living room, lay down on the sofa without removing her hat or scarf, and immediately fell asleep, nothing to be seen of her face but the tip of her nose and bluish, frost-cracked lips.

He covered her with a blanket and towards morning, after much speculation and all sorts of worries, he too finally fell asleep.

That was how he met the girl.

Chapter 2

The following day, the girl woke around two. He offered her some coffee which she accepted, still wearing the hat and scarf. They sat in kitchen and chatted, at first tentatively, and he smiled to himself at her attempts to discover if they'd had sex, where they'd met, and so on. The conversation dissolved into laughter when he told her what had happened, and together they tried to figure out why she was there.

She said the last thing she remembered was leaving a bar, and that she'd probably been heading to her friend's house nearby, on the city's west side. Then – possibly – she'd seen a light in his window, come over all mischievous and decided to ring the doorbell.

“Or maybe it was the name on the buzzer ...? But then again, I haven't got a clue why I walked up to the front door to begin with! I don't know.”

“You said something about names,” he said and they laughed some more. She seemed surprisingly perky, considering how drunk she'd been the night before; she praised the view over the cemetery, praised the snow, light and stillness, smoked some cigarettes and finally took off the hat and scarf. At a guess, she was just over twenty. She was pretty, or maybe *pleasant-looking* was a better description, and he couldn't understand what she was doing there; not that he considered himself unworthy of the company of girls, exactly, but according to his experience of the city's nightlife a girl like that – a girl who liked to drink – ought to go straight from the bar to an afterparty, or to

the house of a lover. A girl like her didn't wander the streets on her own or barge in on a man who lived by a cemetery and thought of nothing but death.

"It doesn't really matter," he said. "Nice to occasionally get an unexpected visit," which was a mild way of putting how he felt; he was almost uncontrollably happy to have someone to talk to at last, someone he immediately took a liking to. The fact this feeling seemed mutual only increased his joy, and he thought he could suddenly see that his life over the last few months had been less like a life than a *state*. He decided to start breaking out of his solitude as soon as possible, start walking towards life again.

They talked some more of the snow, without falling into small talk, then the girl checked her watch and said she'd have to go, apologized for barging in on him in the middle of the night and promised it wouldn't happen again. She took off and Emil didn't expect to see her again, which made him sad.

"This was fun ... a lot of fun ..." he whispered to no-one in particular, then sat down once more to work on the essay.

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Just before midnight, his Polish acquaintance Martin came round. The area where he gathered his worms extended from the Klambratún park and west towards Seltjarnarnes, but he normally kept to the Thingholt area or the west side. In the summer he sold them

to fishing stores or individuals, and had made a living off this for several years, had access to a garage where he grew worms in chipboard crates, feeding them coffee grounds, rotting vegetables and meal. During winter, the worms reproduced in the crates, but whenever it rained he'd pick ones that were fully grown from people's gardens.

Martin had moved to Iceland at the age of two, which probably made him a sort of minimal immigrant, but Emil could think of him in no other way. His Icelandic was better than Emil's, and it seemed fitting to call him Icelandic when you listened to him speak, but the facial expressions and the inflections were different. – There was something exotic about him, and it annoyed Emil that he should associate this with nationality in the first place. He just couldn't think of anything better.

The Pole seemed to simultaneously live the most attractive and most tragic life possible, just like Emil himself. They weren't exactly friends; they'd met in the cemetery late at night shortly after Emil moved to the flat, and for some reason he'd invited Martin round for coffee. Ever since, Martin would occasionally knock on his door, maybe because they both usually stayed up during the night.

Martin said he'd grown tired of sitting at home and had wanted to take a walk.

"It's beautiful outside right now. Haven't you been out at all? You look tired, my friend."

Emil said he'd been doing a lot of work, then thought he was going to talk about something else but heard himself blurt out the story of the girl's visit, then got caught up in detailed explanations, said he'd grown strangely jolly from their conversation, using the

word “jolt” to describe the feeling – a word which made him think of electric chairs and scorched flesh being ripped apart, and the whole thing induced in him a sense of shame and dread, as if he was about to uncover a horrifying secret.

As usual, Martin gave a hearty laugh, and said he could see the jolt in Emil’s eyes.

“Has a light come on in there, my friend? A little white star –”

“Stop talking about it,” Emil said crossly. “Nothing happened. And she won’t be coming back.”

He got Martin to describe the things he saw in the gardens – heard the latest story about a minister’s daughter in a basement on Laufásvegur who would undress for Martin once a week, when she came home drunk just after midnight on Thursdays, and a witty anecdote about the painter Kjarval that Martin had read in a magazine while in a dentist’s waiting room.

“I also read that the Aztecs invented popcorn. Does that sound dubious? I must have thought so as well when I first read it: maize on a pan over a fire in Central America. But why did that sound so far-fetched? Probably because of what I associate with popcorn – popcorn is something we eat at the cinema during an action flick, the opposite in life to the Indians of Central America, and maybe it’s this thing about their *inventing* it! There’s no symbolic image more fitting for the collective and passive than the cinema screen, everyone munching their popcorn.”

“Come on now,” Emil said, attempting to immerse himself in the conversation. “Doesn’t that apply just as well to people reading the news, in a collective language in the newspapers, over a bowl of cereal, or in general to most of the things people do –”

“Yes, probably! But what does that tell us? – that modern culture is more about participation than creation, encouraging the masses to be passive – because it’s necessary. Increased security demands increased impotency, or participation by proxy – metaphorical or fake participation, sublimation and image-ism. How can capitalism produce and sell images, to an even greater extent than flour or oil? Because our hunger for avoidance from our instincts has never been greater, because our safety has never been greater. At some point we agreed to live a long life, in security and boredom – generally speaking, rather than to live a short life in a red-blue dream, full of sex or at least death and *violence*.”

“But why do you assume we have more security? Hasn’t the world generally been teeming with conflicts and wars, more so during the 20th century than ever? Total wars, the firestorms, the nuclear bomb, the gas chambers –”

“That’s nonsense. This romantic misunderstanding was born in the 19th century – when we started looking around and anthropology came into being – a misunderstanding, inspired by Rousseau, that the natural state of the human was this innocence and kindheartedness; loincloth-clad children in the jungle who sometimes shook their spears in the faces of nearby tribes, sometimes killing a couple, no more. This is nonsense. In the communities of hunters and gatherers – the social structure most natural to humans, by which we lived for a hundred thousand years – around twenty

percent of the population are killed by violence; men, women and children. These one hundred hunters who met in a field, let out a roar and shook their spears, normally killed no more than one or two from each team – and the Rousseauist anthropologists came over all tearful on account of the coziness. But what they missed, or ignored, was the fact this children’s game took place once or twice a month, until one tribe was so overpowered – due to the collective number of casualties – that the others felt they could deal with a second stage attack, which meant invading the opponents’ village under cover of darkness and *exterminating everyone* in the village, except the occasional woman kept from then on as a procreation slave to boost the numbers of the winning tribe.”

“Sounds unlikely ...”

“It’s the truth, my friend. And every year in these communities, *twenty percent of the population* died from violence. Do you understand this? How big this number is ...? The second world war in Europe is what comes closest to this, but that is a singular event in time and comes nowhere near this percentage, let alone if we take the *entire* 20th century into the equation, or the 19th or the 18th or the entire 3rd century, it makes no difference. – This is what we call civilization! In a sense we’ve conquered death, or managed to build around ourselves this fortress of civilization to keep it away! A feat, my friend? Or not? Might we be paying a price? Something we’re not seeing? Something which matters?”

“I don’t understand what you’re getting at with these percentages of yours. Are you saying humankind is evil in itself? Whereas civilization is good?”

“Far from it! Humankind is far from evil. Or maybe only twenty percent of it is? Maybe I’m claiming that the “natural state” of the human is peace, love and harmony, and twenty percent violence and war? – Whether you fulfill it by watching or participating. You should use this in your essay: man is twenty percent evil! And of course it’s not a question of being good or evil –”

“It’s one theory, I guess,” Emil said, interrupting him. Long conversations like this made him tired, his thoughts would become airborne, revolving around each other.

“It’s the *truth*, not a theory.” Martin laughed for some reason Emil didn’t understand, finished his cup of coffee and said he was going home to do some painting, then disappeared into the snowfall. Martin made oil paintings which Emil had never seen and hadn’t asked to see; he imagined they would depict bluish, frost-laced worms like shiny fluorescent light sticks buried deep in the ground.

Chapter 3

After this eventful Saturday, solitude again enveloped Emil, strangely stubborn as it was, and apart from the weekly stroll to the supermarket out in Seltjarnarnes, where he never saw any customers, the days passed uneventfully.

He worked on his essay, read and passed time. Just over a week later, shortly after midnight on a Saturday, the doorbell rang again. – The girl, again so drunk she could hardly stand. He helped her up the stairs, she lay down on the sofa but this time she woke up earlier the next day, sat there for a while and they chatted about the weather, the native drinking culture and a hurricane in Burma.

From then on she began to visit fairly regularly, usually every few days but at any hour. The Wednesday after, she got there before noon, around ten o'clock, so drunk he carried her up the stairs, put her to bed and pulled the duvet over her. Later that same day, when she woke up, she mentioned the snow.

“Snow?” she said, her voice hoarse and crackly, looking out the window, the same cemetery window she'd stood by before, saying the same thing. “It's so beautiful here!” she cried out and laughed a little, maybe because she'd realized she was repeating herself, or maybe just from joy.

She accepted a cup of coffee, but said she had to run off somewhere and asked what time it was.

“Heavy schedule?” he asked. She nodded, kept looking into the snow which was unusually dense – you could only just about see across the street and you could no longer hear the traffic out on Hringbraut.

He asked her name, and she said it wouldn’t be any fun if he knew.

“Too normal,” she said, a tad pretentiously. “And of course it would be best if I didn’t know your name either, actually I’ve forgotten it now –”

“You don’t know it,” he said. “The name on the doorbell is my grandfather’s name. He passed away.”

“Aaah ... Passed away. I’m sorry. Is this his flat?” Emil nodded and couldn’t actually remember whether they’d had this discussion before. Probably not. “What are you doing in your grandfather’s flat?”

“I came here after he died, to clean and take care of this and that. Then the solicitor told me I’d inherited the flat.”

She smiled and looked at him searchingly. Her eyes were blue-green and turbid, like a moat with stale water.

“Our family isn’t particularly big – in case you’re wondering why I’m my grandfather’s sole heir. His only child, my dad that is, lives abroad and they didn’t see each other very often. Granddad owned a few flats, I think, and my dad inherited everything apart from this one. I don’t know why I got it ... Maybe because I didn’t own one myself ... We’d usually have a meal together when we met up. I cooked. Granddad’s

memory had started to go and the conversation was practically the same from week to week, from word to word ... But it's weird how that didn't matter ... " Suddenly he couldn't remember what he'd been going to say, but kept forcing the words out: "It's weird how little it actually matters ... what you say." His eyes started to fill up with tears, he felt as if his chest would cave in from a sudden, almost outrageous desire which nonetheless seemed to bear only a distant connection to his grandfather.

The girl noticed nothing and began to put on the clothes lying on the hallway floor, then wrinkled her nose and said: "No offence, but it smells a bit funny in here ..."

Emil nodded. "The bird, I suppose," he then said, after a brief hesitation; he'd actually expected this discussion much sooner, even long before the girl so much as stepped into the flat.

"Is there a bird here?"

"Not anymore. It was here when I arrived. An old budgerigar."

"Was it dead? Because ... Sorry to be asking like this. You don't have to talk about it, if you don't want to, seriously –"

"It's alright," he said. "It feels good to talk, it's not a secret at all. No, it died later on, the bird. It caught fire ... I'd let it out, like I sometimes did, to fly around the flat. I sat there writing and there was a candle close by on the table. The bird was waddling around on the table, and once when it turned around rapidly to look up at me, its tail jutted into the flame. And the tail started to burn, without it seeming to really notice."

“Hm. I see. Then what?”

“Then it noticed. It jumped into the air and jerked its head quickly backwards but then it gave a start, flew off screeching, lurching into the walls, hitting this and that. But mainly it circled the living room, faster than I’d ever seen it fly before, which made it even worse ... The fire was magnified by the rush of air, stretching up its body, towards the wings, and soon it was all aflame and I lay down on the floor, underneath the table.”

“Bloody hell!”

“It might sound silly, hiding underneath a table, but I didn’t know what else to do ... The smell coming off it was really strong. I assume that’s what you’re referring to, though I might not smell it, not anymore ... Then it hit the wall, over there ...” He pointed to a dark stain in the middle of the wall.

The girl walked up to the wall, put her face up close and examined the stain, running a finger across it.

“You ought to clean it off,” she then said. “And maybe air out the flat a bit better. Don’t you ever open the windows?” He felt a rising irritation at her interference, but said nothing.

“You’re weird,” she said. “And I need to get going.” She walked towards the door again and put her shoes on, said she might see him again later, but hesitated on the way out and turned towards him in the doorway.

“I still don’t understand why I wake up here. Not just once, but again and again ... It’s like I’m not in control of myself. I hope that doesn’t sound bad. It’s got nothing to do with you or how I feel about you. I just don’t understand why I always end up here. The things I get up to when I’m drunk! Am I maybe interrupting you?” He denied it, but of course she did interrupt him. Her face looked pale.

“Good,” she said. “If I come back and I’m interrupting, then don’t answer the doorbell. Just don’t be mean to me, I can get really sensitive when I drink, even though you might not be able to tell.”

She left.

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A few days later, on a Sunday afternoon after she’d slept off the drink, she appeared in the bedroom doorway. He caught sight of her out of the corner of his eye, looked up from his book and smiled.

“You stare into books as if they’re doors from a burning building,” she said and giggled. “I’m just messing with you. I read that line somewhere. But still, you have a rather astringent or *cold* look in your eyes when you read, don’t you think the books will get frightened, they’ll collapse under the strain?”

“You’re in a jolly mood. Aren’t you too hungover to think this much? And to use words like “astringent”?”

“I’m always jolly. Hungover and jolly. The worst is over once I’m up and about.” She turned away, retching discreetly. The night before he’d steered her into his bed and then slept on the living room sofa. She asked if she could take a shower, he said yes, found her a towel and kept on reading. He heard her turn off the tap and could hear her brushing her teeth. When she came out she said she had her own toothbrush.

“I’m saying that so you don’t think I stole yours. There’s a limit to what I expect from other people.” She lifted up her toothbrush, which was small, green and straggly.

“Don’t you live anywhere?” he asked, poured some coffee into a mug and handed it to her. She sat down with him and took a sip. Their interaction had started to take on a slight resemblance to an everyday routine; she’d wake up, drink coffee; then they’d chat for fifteen minutes, half an hour or even an hour, and then she’d leave.

“I think it’s best if you don’t know,” she said. “Same as my name. Besides, I think you like it better this way. You just don’t know it.” She looked up from the mug towards the desk and the papers and asked what he was writing all the time. He said it was probably best if she didn’t know.

“You’re writing about death. You’re a poet who sits and writes for ten hours a day, writing at least ten or fifteen poems about death. A day. And once a year you collect the best ones and publish a five hundred page death book nobody’s interested in, and the

bookstores won't even stock it because it's so destructive, because people tighten up inside just from reading it and some of them die." He smiled and shook his head.

"I'm writing an essay. Or trying to, anyway."

"About what?"

"About death in the works of Halldór Laxness."

"Hm ..." She rolled her eyes. "Doesn't sound too good. Why don't you just write about your own death, my friend? How long do you think you've got in this life?"

"You sound like an old woman. I'll get eighty years, probably. Just over fifty left. Isn't that pretty good? Plenty of time –"

"Not for Halldór Laxness! I don't think this is right for you. You're not the Laxness type. Halldór Laxness won a Nobel Prize, that's all you need to know. His grave is surrounded by cocky cocktail party geezers sucking out his last adages – probably translated from some taoist book or other – until people see him for what he was; a pretentious but talented go-getter."

"Don't be so naïve. You can't hate Halldór Laxness just because he won a Nobel Prize."

"Oh really, why not? What about all the people who love him for that very reason? The Icelandic people, for example? He's an institution, a colour brochure from the Ministry of Arts. Read one of his books, pay your bills and then get started on something that matters."

“So this is a matter of principle, then? You’re against Laxness – to balance out those who are for him?”

“Yes. But it’s what I said as well; I don’t like his books. There’s an inhuman tone to them. Like they were written by a robot dressed as a dandy, swinging a quill and pretending to be a man –”

“Ah, come on now ...”

“A man who lacks genuine sympathy with *the human condition*. Loves mankind but not the individual! I’m sorry to say this, but that’s just the way it is. I’m sure he was a kind man, nice around the house and to his wife and kids, but I can’t see it anywhere in his words. He knew all these words and he knew how to put them together, but there’s a hollowness to it.”

It’s almost as if she were describing herself, he thought. How pretentious! Yet another confirmation of the fact that people best describe their own faults when decrying what they dislike about the world or other people. But he said nothing.

“Let’s not start arguing about this,” she said and smiled. “Death and the Nobel Prize! But at least I knew you’d be writing about death. And I’m just as certain you write about death for yourself. Fiction, secretly. I can tell.”

“That’s nice. You see something dead in me?”

“No, or maybe I do. In your eyes. Have you ever died? Has your love died, your hopes and dreams? All the beautiful things you once were or meant to become?”

“Isn’t that *the human condition* you were just talking of? Hasn’t everyone died at least once by the time they’re past twenty?”

“Everyone? What are you on about?! Most people have only just managed to memorize the TV guide instead of their textbooks. Have a job which surrounds them with clothes, furniture, cars, and their partners are smashing; all the things that you lack. And it does them very well and horribly badly until roughly the age of forty, when the repression and procrastination begins to totter and people start breaking up. – They end up running away from themselves until the final death, or they achieve a strained, delicate balance which can easily be upset ... Everything I’m not going to be. I’d just as soon die *right now*.”

After this they stayed silent for a while, the girl lit up a cigarette and he felt as if she was trying to calm herself down by staying quiet. Everything she said became in some way personal, and probably a little distorted. – The opposite of what he was aiming for, at least in his essay.

He poured more coffee into her mug.

“You asked me if I was writing anything,” he said, looking up at the ceiling. It was white. “I sometimes write stories. Once I wrote about a cow that walked into a village.”

“And then what?”

“It was dragging its calf behind and the calf was dead ... Hung rotting by the umbilical cord.” He regretted having told her; didn’t know why he’d felt compelled to open his mouth.

“I knew it,” she said and put out her cigarette. “Death. But the city we live in is also suffused with death, repressed or glorified.” She started telling him about an acquaintance she’d met in a bar, a guy who’d come home drunk a few weeks earlier after a boring Thursday night and decided to kill himself, just like that, without ever before having realized this was something he wanted to do: “He decided to just get it over and done with, scanned the flat and saw it in a new light; everywhere there was plenty of darkness, breakups, loneliness and a distorted, pathetic self-image, but when it came to death it seemed remarkably limited. In the end he found himself a necktie, tied it to a clothes rail by the front door and attempted to hang himself, dangling from the railing and kicking around until the railing broke off the wall and he collapsed to the floor.

As he lay there sobbing on the floor, mourning his own patheticness, there was a knock on the door, which obviously startled him – he wasn’t expecting anyone. The knocking was aggressive, somebody shouted his name and in the end he scrambled to his feet and opened the door. His upstairs neighbour was standing in the hallway, a member of the techno band *Gus Gus*. He asked what the hell was going on, and before my acquaintance knew it, he found himself apologizing, this snivelling, cowering mess of a man – he *apologized for the noise*. After which the neighbour, this former dance-jigging, pill-popping freak, started discussing the communal areas, that my acquaintance was keeping his laundry on the clothes line in the laundry room for too long – some completely and utterly trivial everyday crap which didn’t matter in the least, at least not following straight on from his first attempt at death! But still he discussed this, got sucked into the conversation and when they’d reached some sort of agreement they said

goodbye, my acquaintance closed the door again, saw the railing and the jackets on the floor and remembered what he'd been doing – and do you know what that was?"

Emil shook his head.

"No? He'd just finished his first so-called recreational suicide attempt; the first casual, almost half-hearted attempt on his own life. Which is very popular today in the city's nooks and crannies. Kills time, if not yourself."

Emil kept shaking his head but no longer knew why. He wanted her to stop talking, but also wanted her to carry on – for as long as the world would last; if he could simply sit there forever, keep his eyes closed and listen.

"If you only knew," she went on, "how many people in this stark, grey city live a life so tormented they'll consider killing themselves, yet a life good enough for them to muster up the energy to put it into action – people who don't really want to die but want to find out what it's like, as if you can have a taster of death, or just the trailer. And when you attempt to hang yourself with a necktie at shoulder height but then rip it off to discuss the communal laundry room, you're telling more than the story of how members of techno bands become middle-aged – to me, it describes the *state* central Reykjavík is in, and how close death becomes when it's systematically made as unreal as it is *nowadays*. And it makes me sad, I have sympathy for everyone who does this sort of thing. I feel sympathy for everyone suffering and withering away in this city."

She stood up to go to the toilet. Meanwhile he sat there motionless, looking at the pack of cigarettes on the table; could feel a tingling in his fingertips wanting to reach for the pack and light one up, but he didn't indulge himself.

He heard the toilet being flushed, then she came back into the living room and walked over to the window facing the cemetery. He opened his mouth to offer her something to eat, but she beat him to it:

"The first dead body I ever saw was my grandmother's," she said, lit up a cigarette and looked out the window. "I was thirteen. It was winter time and it had been snowing in my neighbourhood. I looked at the body, but of course didn't recognize it as my grandmother ... Do you know what I think a dead body looks like, lying in its coffin?"

He shook his head.

"Like a glowing, silent snowstorm."

Chapter 4

In hindsight, he felt the direction their conversations would take was most often incomprehensible, as if the jumps between subjects were random, the conversation nothing but loose ends. The girl had a way of heading off into some direction which seemed to diverge from what had gone before, but actually didn't. He often felt as if he was running behind her, however hungover and just out of bed she was, and felt old and stiff, maybe because she always seemed to head directly into the centre of her thoughts, never speaking of anything other than the inner layer of things, her logic exotic, evading the words.

On the other hand this random intensity sometimes came close to being pretentious. But perhaps it was unfair to call it pretentiousness; rather, it was as if the girl was forever testing her relationship to reality: "If I claim A is true when in reality it is obviously B, will I get away with it?" Or: "If the phone rings in the next five minutes, it'll all go wrong and I'll be doing telesales for the rest of my life, otherwise I'll become a circus master." – As if she was always projecting herself outwardly to fit herself against the surroundings, then pulling back, all in an attempt to confirm where she ended and her surroundings began, something he recalled doing as a teenager but seemed strange for a person past the age of twenty. Probably it was just the alcohol that brought it on.

Thus he attempted to analyse the girl, as if to contain her. And personally, he would have gladly exchanged this pretentiousness for his own tentativeness, which sprang from shyness and a lack of practice when it came to conversation.

“Have you ever been religious?” he asked one afternoon. She’d refused to eat anything but sat there drinking coffee and chainsmoking, either looking at him where he sat at the desk, or out across the cemetery.

She shook her head. “For a while I quite liked Buddhism. But I don’t know if that has to do with religion, precisely.”

“What is it, if not a religion?”

“I don’t know. A science, maybe. The systematic investigation of an inner reality, experiential science. Not a religion, except maybe to begin with. – You trust someone, for instance Buddha, well enough to try out the method they recommend. Then you just sense whether you want to carry on or not.” She took a drag at her cigarette. “And you most certainly don’t lie down on the ground in shame, waiting for a vengeful daddy god to come at you all jizzing and wrathful.”

“Now, now,” he said and smiled; he could tell she was angling for a reaction.

“Don’t *now now* me! That’s just the way things are.”

“So did you meditate?” He had tried meditation sometime during his late teens, around the same time he’d attempted to have an out-of-body experience, but had given up.

She nodded. “I meditated according to this method, I can’t remember what it’s called. You’d sit and concentrate on the breathing, zero out your mind. If something came up you’d label it but not be carried away with the content, for example you’d say to

yourself “think think”, and let that suffice. And then you’d zero it out again. Or if the thought hadn’t yet been formed into words, you’d say “feeling feeling”, or analyse it more precisely down to “anger anger”, “joy joy”.”

“And what was the effect?”

“I did it more or less all day for a few weeks. Two or three times I reached a state similar to what I’d experienced before from swallowing ecstasy, my heart somehow became all fluid and lachrymose, all my senses open – and I mean wide open. Then there are other methods. One of them has forty predecided topics for meditation; number 39 is meditating on the Disgust of Food or the Disgust of Sex, you can also simply meditate on blue if you want to.”

“Why didn’t you carry on meditating?”

“I don’t know. I normally lose interest in most things after a few weeks or months at the most ... I just stopped doing it. In Buddhism they speak of taming the monkey brain; the restless, screeching thoughts running all over the jungle. I suppose my monkey still hasn’t been tamed. For example I’ll sit and read about forty topics for meditation but then I’ll start adding meditations that the world obviously doesn’t need, but I don’t let that stop me; I’ll add a meditation on mosquitos, for example.” She pulled a face. “Or whatever ... I loathe having those ugly little creatures suck my blood – it insults my pride. I picture their pricks having just come out of a rat or a dead dog before entering me ... But maybe the angst just comes from wondering what kind of a god would have created these insignificant freaks? What kind of a *freak god* could explain a mosquito? A mosquito is hardly more than a single chromosome with wings. They don’t write poetry, don’t

meditate on blue in their spare time. They suck blood and inside their little arses the blood turns into small offspring – more flies – who then fly out of their mummy’s arse to fetch more blood to create more little freaks to fly out of even more arses.”

“I thought women were used to it,” Emil said.

“Used to what?”

“Being penetrated by pricks.”

She looked at him with a smile, then suddenly leapt across the floor and started to tickle him. They rolled around the living room laughing, pinching and tickling each other, then she lit a cigarette and the fight came to an end as quickly as it had begun. He didn’t know how to act and became awkward, but she inhaled the smoke and put on a serious, distant face. It surprised him how rapidly her mood would change, like a kid’s.

“I doubt Buddha had any problems with mosquitos, though. Or that he thought mosquitos were certain types of soulless beings or machines and put that into a million meaningless words. They were simply there. But in the Bible they’re probably denounced by some raving prick or other as the Whore’s Winged Drops of Blood – how everyone should come together and cleanse them from the Earth and throw them down to Hell into the Eternal Fire, spread out mercy and freedom, and while you’re at it why not convert the cannibals of the Caribbean to hamburgerism! Christianity is a child’s religion. Or all religions are ... I just think it’s so funny when you see these grown men with their fat egos furrowing their brow, spurning all this nonsense, and seeing people kowtowing to it. As if it even matters.”

“It doesn’t sound like you think it’s funny. More like you’re angry.”

“Of course I’m angry ... How do you spot a Christian?” She stubbed out her cigarette, then lay down on her back on the floor, looking up at the ceiling: “He’ll always do the exact opposite to what his religion dictates. Every single time. And do you know how to recognize a mosquito?”

He shook his head. „I don’t.“

“It’s quite similar to a midge, and to the fear inside you. Did you know that the mosquito has killed more people than any other animal since the beginning of time? It’s been with mankind since the beginning of its history. Have you ever wondered about the purpose of human life? We’re the mosquito’s domestic animals. Two million dead every year, children, bankers, whores and artists – dissolved into winged drops of blood and drifting away.”

He’d never been particularly sensitive to faces or anything to do with appearances. What he sensed about her most strongly was her smallness; she made him think of labyrinths, mandalas and crystals, anything that was simple enough, complicated and repetitive enough to contain the world. Which he didn’t feel she did – not from day one, but then gradually.

One morning as she lay sleeping on the sofa, he sat by the desk on the other side of the room, fitting her into his hand; her entire body from head to toes could fit between the thumb and index finger of one hand, which induced in him a strange sense of elation.

Maybe this only served to illustrate his hidden arrogance towards her, that he considered himself to be further along – where to? – in life than her, the child, her psyche both too small and too big to be able to play a single role at a time. He was conscious of this attitude of his; he was conscious of every possible attitude, origin and approach; every single thought of his in the past and present and its probable development in the near future, at least up to the point that he couldn't picture a *solution*.

But no, if arrogance was anywhere to be found, then it lay in his sense of feeling small in comparison with the girl; her impulsiveness, the courage to throw herself off the precipice he considered life to be, to not accept the tepid or the uneventful, and if life didn't live up to her expectations then to force it towards a result, be it good or bad, never caring which it would be.

Probably this was an iconic image he had created for himself, but at least she fascinated him for now. And he had nothing else. He could help the girl line up her thoughts and put them into order, which was easy, but in return she could push him out of the hopeless rut he had perhaps never chosen for himself – which was difficult, and nobody else seemed capable of it, let alone he himself. Nothing he'd done during these thirty years he'd lived had brought him any particular joy or freedom from himself, the unhappiness was constant. But he hadn't yet become so eccentric he considered himself unable to live without suffering – he could and he wanted to, but didn't know how.

It would probably soon be over. He found it hard to place a lot of hope in her, or to trust her. Eventually they would start arguing and she'd disappear into the snow again, one silent, stale morning. He could picture it: the argument and then the deep, loaded

silence in the flat, the stairs creaking, the door slamming, a rustling in the snow and that would be it – yet another person out of his life.

Why was he so afraid? He'd never done anything particularly evil. He had the best of intentions. He hated no-one, not like that, but sometimes he felt as if he'd collapse under this vague, cumbersome feeling which would well up inside him, fill his entire being and spread across the whole world; an uncomfortable mix of love and hatred which he'd as yet been unable to grasp or put into words. – This thing that he felt had always been there inside him, but had increased after the girl came into his life, and became almost uncontrollable when he sneaked in to watch her while she slept.

Chapter 5

The next time he saw Martin it was just before midnight on a Monday night.

Emil was standing by a window drinking hot chocolate when he spotted a small light in the cemetery. The light moved slowly between the headstones, disappearing or bouncing off the snow blanket, and he immediately felt sure it was Martin tinkering around the graves.

The situation made Emil think of a spotlight his grandfather had owned and used on jeep trips around the highlands. He climbed up to the small storage attic above the bedroom, found the spotlight and dragged it down to the kitchen along with a battery and some cables.

The spotlight's face was bigger than his. Emil smiled to himself over what he was planning to do, connected the spotlight to the battery and the kitchen was bathed in bright, white light. Then he turned it off, got the window wide open and leaned out. He used both hands to direct the spotlight across the cemetery until he found the shadow between two tree trunks, then turned the light on. A sheer white line dissected the darkness and Martin's shadow disappeared into the circle of light.

Emil's stomach hurt from holding in the laughter, and for a fleeting moment he wondered if he was on the edge of insanity.

Martin stepped out from between the trees, raising one hand to cover his eyes from the light.

“Hello!” he said. “Is that you, my friend?”

“Nooo!” said Emil and tried to make his voice hollow but he couldn’t. He forced himself to turn off the spotlight, deciding to try and behave like a man. When the light went off Martin rubbed his eyes but Emil asked what he’d been doing.

“I’ve seen the light!” Martin laughed. “Which is what happens to everyone who goes into the cemetery. Or at least one can hope ... I was going to visit you later, but I might as well do it now.”

Emil let him in, poured hot chocolate into a mug and offered him a seat.

“No coffee today?”

“I forgot to buy some.”

Martin looked at the spotlight. “This would be good for wormpicking in springtime, before the summer light.”

“I’ll lend it to you. I only just remembered it up in the attic.” He could still feel the laughter inside, feel it wanting to break out and tear up the flat and the house, spit him back into life, but he kept it inside.

They sipped their chocolate.

“How’s the minister’s daughter?” Emil asked after a short silence.

“All is well.” Martin laughed. “But I reckon you’re just asking because you’re thinking about your girl!”

“My girl? Who’s that?”

“Come on! First I saw one star, then another, and now the stars are everywhere! All around your head, and the eyes are like two spotlights. Now you’re in love.”

“I wish you were right,” Emil said and shook his head. “But we’re just friends.” Martin smiled but said nothing, reached into his jacket and pulled out the little box of cigars, offering it to Emil who declined. “I don’t even know her name,” Emil continued in order to fill up the silence. “Or where she lives.”

“Won’t she tell you anything?”

“I don’t want to know anything. She was right. It’s more fun this way ... As if we’re not part of the world, not the official world at least, where everyone is ... It’s hard to explain ...”

„I have time. Have we got anything better to talk about?“

„Maybe this is it: if something doesn’t have a name, or you don’t put it into words – then it’s like it starts to come alive on another level of being, as if it becomes itself to a greater degree, or the emotion or the urge, or whatever it is, becomes stronger ...”

“It? Are you still talking about the girl?” Martin laughed. The smell from his cigar filled the kitchen. „This sounds a bit dangerous though – floating too far into a world without words. But if you’re talking about love, I guess it’s okay.“

Emil decided to stop trying to say what could not be said, nor could he be bothered to engage in a debate on the relationship between language and reality. He taught Martin to work the spotlight, then packed it into a bag together with the battery and placed it by the door, despite Martin's objections.

"Of course you'll take the spotlight. I have no use for it. You can hang it from a tree and clean up entire fields. Maybe you'll point it at the minister's daughter next time she dances for you."

"Maybe ..." Neither of them laughed. From the corner of his eye, Emil could see Martin looking at him, then he finished his hot chocolate and said he needed to get going. They walked out into the hall.

"Are you still writing your essay?" Martin asked.

"Yes. I'm hoping to finish it soon ... I don't know, though. Sometimes it seems as if the theory isn't going to hold."

"It'll work out somehow. And anyway, theorizing is always a good thing, as such; it makes your mind bright and alert. While I was growing up in the Árbær area I didn't hear a single theory about anything, except from my parents, I guess."

"What theories did they tell you about?" Emil asked, suddenly glad to change the subject – after all this talk of death.

"Theories on anything you could think of; how to discuss politics or sports, how to make candles, build your own fridge during a power cut, or what was the best dance to

make someone fall in love with you; advice on insomnia and heartbreak, how to tell a story. All this from the impoverished villages of Poland.” He smiled. “All part of the culture which isolated them from their neighbours and made them second class citizens in the small concrete alley which is Árbær, or Iceland. The same culture that kept them alive.”

“Were they unhappy living here?”

“I don’t think so ... People in political exile normally die in less than five years. I can’t remember where I read that. But poor people who have no money to get home don’t have such a great life either. I guess it’s one thing to be far from home if you make that choice yourself, but if you *can’t* go back home ... But no, at least I don’t think my parents were ever any worse off than the average Icelander. At least they had each other. And the fact that two poor, miserable Poles could have more culture in their heads than an entire Reykjavík suburb, the entire Icelandic middle class, is a pity for the Icelandic people. No offense. It’s just a pity.” He put on his jacket, opened the door into the hallway and then turned around in the doorway. “Have you heard the story of the long worm?”

Emil shook his head.

“Once there was a man who saw a worm which was about to disappear into the ground. The man flew into action, grabbed the worm and started pulling on it. He pulled and pulled and more of the worm kept coming out of the ground, but he could never see the other end of it. Towards morning, dozens of metres of worm had come out of the ground and the fuss was starting to attract the attention of people in the surrounding

houses. Little by little, more people gathered around the man to help him tackle this unusually long worm, each of them grabbing hold of a part of the worm and pulling. And still the worm grew longer, and more people joined in, until this incredibly long stroll of worm people reached the street, whence it coiled through the streets of the city and all the way out of the city. The worm filled up the city and its weight was such, and the void inside the Earth so great, that Earth collapsed, becoming a great dark pit where the sun could not be seen and from then on, everyone was hungry, tired and sad in the darkness.”

Martin picked up the black plastic bag with the spotlight and the battery.

“Is that the end?” Emil asked.

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know ... What’s the meaning of the story?”

“It’s about Iceland. That’s what Icelanders are like. They work too much, take out too many loans and have too many longings that just want fulfilling but don’t give anything back. And soon there’ll be nothing but worms wherever they look.”

Chapter 6

“Have you ever seen a ghost?” she asked.

“Once ... It was nothing spectacular.”

„What happened?“

“I was walking through the cemetery at night. This was years ago ... I was sort of looking around when I saw a man, not far from me, not more than two or three metres away. Of course I flinched, because I was certain he hadn't been there a moment earlier.”

“What did he look like?“

“I didn't really notice ... He was wearing a uniform of some sort, like what a bus driver wears, but no hat. The jacket was tattered and covered with dirt, as were the trousers.”

“I see.”

“But I was only startled for a second, then I saw the man's face and started to feel sorry for him. He looked so puzzled, and sad –”

“As if he was at a complete loss?“

“Exactly. Baffled, lost and sad, I thought, and wanted to put my arms around him and hug him ... I don't exactly feel like that very often, but I was overcome with this sympathy ... Then he asked if I could help him, in a childlike voice, and asked where he

was. I think I said something about being in a cemetery ... “I just want to go home,” the man then said, and as I reached out towards him he disappeared, just like that. Poof ...”

“The dead bus driver,” she said and took a sip of her water. She was being strangely quiet that day, an anxious tension in her face. Maybe that was why he kept talking, almost as if he was striving to cheer her up.

“I know a better story, though. My mate Martin told me, he heard it from a minister’s daughter in Thingholt. – Or at least that’s what he told me. I think he sometimes lies.”

“How does the story go?”

“It’s about a man who always appears to people when they masturbate, or actually at a really precise moment; just as the orgasm has taken over and is going to have its way, no matter what – at that moment, it’s as if people can see something out of the corner of their eye, a man crouched beside them, by the side of the bed or wherever ... Right next to their faces. And what’s more, the man always holds both his hands up to his face, the thumb and index finger of each hand forming a frame around his eyes, as if he’s holding a camera. But there is no camera to be seen. And the only picture that gets taken is that which will stay with the masturbator for the rest of their life: those lifeless, staring eyes inside the frame – lifeless, maybe not least because the man died a long time ago. In his time he became known around town, or infamous more like it, as one of the fallen sons of the bourgeoisie; an educated, bright lad from the Thingholt area whose life went down the drain, not because of drink but because of the perversity which seems to have gradually taken over ... People began to talk of how he’d seek out people in need of

money, whether it was for drugs or to feed their kids, and would pay them to masturbate. It didn't matter whether they took their clothes off or how they did it – they just had to come, and when that happened he'd photograph their faces.”

“So he still appears to people, to this day?”

“Yes.”

“And only around the Thingholt area?”

“I think so.”

“Phew ... Who is this Martin character, by the way?”

“He picks worms.”

“He picks worms, right. And who's the minister's daughter?”

“This girl who lives on Laufásvegur. I don't know much about her ... Except she undresses for Martin when she comes home drunk, usually on the weekends.”

“Hmm. Good for her. So when do they talk?”

“I don't know. Through the window, I guess, afterwards.”

“After what? Do they masturbate? Or just him? Does she undress, lie down on the bed and masturbate? Or does she get enough of a kick just from undressing?”

“I've obviously not taken enough interest in this. Maybe you should meet him yourself ... But I guess that would somehow violate your anonymity rule, wouldn't it?”

“Yes. And it’s probably enough for her just to undress, regardless of what he does. That’s what girls are like. More worried about servicing their man than themselves. Afterwards she’ll put on a dressing gown, walk up to the window and they’ll smoke and talk, quietly and by candlelight. They might be in love. I think their relationship is different from how you’ve imagined it.”

“It’s possible.”

“And what else has he seen through people’s windows?”

“Once he saw a suicide. A man sat down on a chair and taped a plastic bag round his head –”

“Did he see the man kill himself?”

“Yes. He was in a garden by this detached house, in the middle of the night. Suddenly a light came on in one of the basement windows and he could see straight into the room ... He saw a man stumbling through the door into some kind of a TV room with a chair, a television set and shelves stacked with movies. The man was obviously drunk, he staggered across the room holding a bottle in one hand and a plastic bag in the other, sat on the chair, turned on some cop show or other on the TV and drank from the bottle ... Martin was about to leave when he finally saw the man fetch a roll of tape from the bag, and some more bags which he pulled over his head, then wrapped the tape around his neck. Then he just sat there, the roll of tape dangling at his chest, until he clenched his fists and started drumming at the air and shaking himself, almost as if he was filled with a desire to dance. Eventually he stopped moving and sat motionless on the chair.”

“Dead, presumably. And what did your friend Martin do?”

“Nothing ... He claims people have a right to kill themselves if they want to. He left.”

“*Fuck ...*” she hissed, and he couldn’t tell if she was surprised or shocked. “You’ve got to stop doing this!” she yelled.

“Stop doing what?”

“You think about death too much.”

“No more than you do.”

“It doesn’t matter which of us does it *more often*. You think about death too much and you need to be careful; we can discuss me later if you want ...”

They both sat staring silently at the ceiling, until the girl asked: “Why don’t you write a story about the Rafflesia flower?”

“Maybe because I don’t know what it is?” He faked laughter. “Why don’t you write about it?”

“I have no concentration. You have the concentration and the composure. I may be able to talk, but I can’t write.”

“What’s a Rafflesia flower?”

“It comes into bloom once a year, always just after midnight on a rainy night; it’s a parasite living off tree roots, and when it’s in bloom – which lasts a few days – it gives off

a strong scent, reminiscent of the smell off a human corpse. It was given its name by Thomas Raffles, the founder of Singapore, one of the most prolific designers of the British empire, named after himself ... Maybe we both think about death too much," she added after a short pause. "Or perhaps death thinks about us too much."

"Then let's stop talking about it," he said, starting to get annoyed.

"You just have to be careful. It's dangerous to think about death too much while neglecting life. Your attitude towards death might turn into the dog's attitude towards its master; you think you understand something and that you're even in control of your own behaviour, but really you're all deference, your relationship a mixture of fear and submissiveness – at least for your part. And the understanding is nothing but the loss of your own self, an old and forgotten conditioning. You don't understand the longings or the nature of your master, you were simply forced to see how he behaved and when, not why. That's how much *understanding* you have."

"God!" he cried out, throwing his hands up in the air. "Obviously I've got to do something else!" The fucking pest, the little prattling, droning machine, he thought and for the first time since they'd met he wanted to get rid of her and be on his own.

"Yes, God! To confront death as an equal is impossible unless you have a firm grip on life, or believe in life at the very life ... You can't despise it, like you do. As do I, probably –"

"Who said I wanted to *understand* death?"

“Well, why else would you be constantly discussing it and writing about it? Or does your essay have more to do with the works of Halldór Laxness than with death? “About *death* in the works of ...” Wasn’t that what you said? You must be doing something more than stating how *he* understood death –”

“You can’t *understand* death!” he shouted. “Nobody can! Nobody understands death. But you can still write about it. You can write about anything – anything else! But still you’re forever writing about death. You can write about nothing but fucking life and still be stuck on death and only ever talk about death, no matter how hard you try!” He could feel himself starting to flush, the blood burning his face, and couldn’t remember the last time he’d shouted like that, probably as a teenager.

“So you’ll write the story for me? About the flower?” He shook his head, reached for a cigarette from her pack and lit up.

She left.

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He thought about what she’d said. He also thought about writing but knew he couldn’t, let alone by commission. Everything he’d managed to write during his lifetime had been built on some misunderstanding or other – having meant to write something else. Once he discovered what was coming out, he’d lose his courage and give up after one or two

paragraphs. He would never have the guts to decide on becoming a writer, or to write more than a few furtive, sheepish sentences.

But a few days after this conversation of theirs, during the long-awaited introduction of the small death into one of the chapters which stood out like thorns from the bulk of the essay, he began to note down something about a bud bursting up through the earth, the size of a cabbage; then it wasn't a flower anymore but a church, and in the church there was a bell and a clapper with a dead child hanging from it, then another child and the third one and somehow the story came bursting out of him and was over and done with in one sitting. By then it was morning; the girl hadn't come and he went to bed, feeling as if he could hear the snow crackling, white and glowing – could hear the snowflakes touching each other as they fell through the air.

Chapter 7

He was sleeping; a yellow bird with large, blood-shot eyes soared through the sky, dived towards the earth and got caught on a barbed-wire fence; his beak opened and closed and gave off an electric bleep like a doorbell.

Emil opened his eyes and heard the doorbell. It was only nine in the morning but he immediately knew who it would be, got up and let her in. She'd just come from a party on Grettisgata where she said she'd been with a friend and "several guys", kicked off her shoes and said, without so much as glancing at him, that she'd been with one of them, spitting it out as if it was something she hadn't wanted to do, but then turned the entire thing into a joke – the boy having sex like a tourist, wandering from one church to the next; gawking, tasting, pinching and stroking as if he wanted to confirm to himself everything he'd read before.

"Idiot!" she shouted and he didn't know whether she was referring to him, the boy or herself. "I don't understand why I do this. I wasn't interested, but still, it was like it had to happen, somehow. Me Tarzan, you bloody fucking Jane ..." Inside him this feeling welled up, resembling pity but also anger. They changed the subject. The girl was different from usual, claimed she'd eaten some shrooms and swallowed too much speed wrapped in toiletpaper. She wanted to go to sleep but said she couldn't sleep on her own.

"Is it okay with you if I fall asleep here?" she asked, looking like she wasn't expecting anything, even a bit shy, as if there really was a possibility he'd turn her down –

punish her, for example, for being with that guy, or say that unfortunately he needed to work so she'd have to leave.

He said of course she could. "And there's obviously no need to ask," he added.

"Thank you," she said, reached inside her jacket and ran into the toilet. "Will you read me a story to put me to sleep –" She said something else which he couldn't hear, shut the toilet door behind her and then he heard the tap humming away while she brushed her teeth.

He smiled and inside him there was this glow of an exalted normality – if only it could always be *precisely* like this, all distant and *distorted*. But something was telling him it would soon come to an end, one day she wouldn't come, nor would she come the day after or the week after or the month after.

When she came out again her face was pale, she said she'd seen something inside the shower that she didn't want to talk about. Then she got undressed and crawled into bed. He sat on the edge of the bed, stroking her white forehead until she felt claustrophobic and asked if he had something to calm her down. He fetched her three co-codamols and she wolfed them down with water, then seemed to calm down after that and lay there looking at him.

"I'm never happy where I am," she said. "Except sometimes. Like now." She smiled. "Although it mostly depends on how I've padded my head ... And I'm forever wanting to move. About a week after I've unpacked the boxes I'll have grown tired of the

flat, the area where I live, and the entire city has become this everyday, droning, background boredom.”

“Maybe you should get a sailboat,” he said and thought he sounded like an old man. “Or ride a motorcycle around the world?”

She pulled a face, then hissed: “*Boring*, waves rising and falling, seeing this and that. Encountering exotic pop music and iPod covers in some port or other, serving as a Disneyland for tourists. An extinct culture underneath a bell jar – fuck it all to hell and back.” She retched into the duvet. “But I’m more sick of myself than anything else ... Have I told you about this spiral I get into?” He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter what it is that happens, just something – a glass breaks on the next table, I jump and that’s how it gradually starts; I start thinking of glasses breaking and I get insecure, feel as if my surroundings are alien to me and I can’t handle them; the fear and the anger start revolving around each other, become airborne like laughing demons until I almost feel as if I’m sucking in energy from the air, and everything becomes bright, like what people describe just before they have an epileptic seizure ... And when everything’s become bright I want to kill someone. I’ll have long since forgotten what the occasion was or where I am, I’m just going mad with the desire to rip someone’s face off, or run into a wall to stop myself from acting on it ... And somehow I’ve gotten by up until now, because of that little voice that normally gets me through the door, back home. Or turns the rage onto me.”

“The alcohol,” he said, but she shook her head.

“No, the alcohol calms me down. I don’t get these fits when I drink. I’ve been like this since I was a kid, like I was born with a defect ... But there’s this voice I sometimes think of, or not a voice, more like something that moves me from the depths ... assumes any form, rhythm, voice, colour, depending on the situation, but on an everyday basis it’s like a bleary background to everything else – the earth, where all thought and all feelings walk. Probably this is my idea of *destiny*, contrary to everything I’ve said about the stupidity of religion.”

“That’s how much one person can contain ...”

“Yes, but not anymore. I could always sense this stability to my thoughts, they weren’t floating about in an incoherent void ... Until the other day, when the stability wasn’t there anymore; I could tell as soon as I woke up. Two months ago probably, just before I started seeing you. The destiny had left me, my life’s entire coherence had disappeared and nothing mattered anymore. I might as well die and my role would be over. So to speak.”

“Have you been thinking about killing yourself?” Emil asked, and after a short silence she nodded.

“Thinking about it ... Which isn’t the same, I guess, as thinking about *doing* it. I think of it as an abstract ... problem ... But I’m tired of talking about problems. You shouldn’t talk about problems too much, not unless you mean to do something about them ...” She had her eyes shut. She’d obviously forgotten having asked him to read her a story. Which was a good thing. He’d deleted the story about the dead children hanging

down from the church bell. And burned what he'd printed off. Which had been more fun than writing the story.

"It's so strange ..." she said.

"What is?"

"I come here, time after time ... And you're always here. This is the only place I ever see you. I go outside and drift around and everything changes, things *happen*, you know, in the outside world, but not in here; here, nothing changes ... As if I'm on the edge of a wheel that's being spun around and I whirl around with it, or try and run to stay in the same place but I never stop until I get here. Like I'm coming into the centre of the wheel."

"And who's spinning the wheel?"

She muttered something. He looked away, out the window across the cemetery; the graves, the black branches. He thought the snow had melted a little overnight, as if the weather was half a degree above zero. Perhaps he had this thought because he could notice the faint hum of traffic from Hringbraut; felt as if it was coming to them from another world and that they'd – each in their own way – gone as far as they possibly could in leaving behind what was known as normal life; they were sitting and having their own private picnic behind a waterfall on a secluded moor and the hum was everyone else, society flowing past them, but it didn't matter anymore and did nothing but deepen the sense of solitude, the solitude they had together, which induced in him a feeling of sorrow and a beauty so strong he could hardly bear to think of it.

Chapter 8

She didn't come back. Over the next two weeks he tried to concentrate on his work. But whenever he started work on the essay, the writing would turn into fiction; he'd get an idea which he thought belonged to the essay, start making notes but then come to in the middle of a story. – Then he'd just carry on, even though he was perfectly aware of the fact that he had started to write fiction. He had a vague sense that he was fighting for his life. He'd never written like this before, neither in those halfbaked, lyrical paragraphs which had occasionally escaped from him, nor in his essays. He wrote with confidence and resolution, yet in a sort of selfless trance; for entire days he'd lose himself in writing stories, some long and some short, all of them similar to the first one about the church bells, but then it was over – when he realized the girl wouldn't be coming back.

He stopped doing everything. He'd stand by the window, make coffee or walk around the flat; switch the radio on or off, make coffee and drink it; make the most of utterly trivial actions: brushing his teeth for half an hour, spending an hour shaving, bursting into sudden laughter at a perching bird sitting on a branch in the cemetery.

“Like an idiot,” he muttered to himself, *like an idiot and a fool*. Maybe he wasn't so different from that bird – alone in a leafless tree in the middle of winter in Iceland. Hadn't they both accidentally got *left behind*, to endure the long winter of the soul on their own? Or had a *decision* been made? He felt as if he had called upon himself a misfortune of some kind which he still could not understand, but at the same time felt that this misfortune had never really been subject to his will, but rather had been

inevitable; that he'd never had a choice. He could no longer fall asleep, at least not well enough to feel like he'd "slept"; partly, the reason was that he'd started to listen out for even the tiniest scrape or rustle by the front door which might indicate that the girl was hunched out there, drunk and maybe incapable of pushing the button; and partly, the reason was that he didn't really move and hadn't done so for a long time; the only movement was in his thoughts and they turned on themselves, no longer had any connection with his surroundings and the essay had long since stopped mattering, nothing mattered anymore.

I have to make some changes, he thought one morning, got himself out of the flat and took an energetic walk down to the seaside, along the coast, practically all the way into a desert of six lane roads, car parks and shopping centres he hadn't even known existed in this city, then went back and lay down on the floor at the flat, nauseous from the clean air and exercise, or from the thought she might have come by while he was away.

He missed her. He decided to admit as much to himself. From a sudden rush of industriousness he went shopping at the supermarket and as usual saw no other customers. When the twenty-year old checkout boy gave him his change Emil thanked him, the boy reddened and muttered something into his chest. Emil felt embarrassed for both of them. The girl was right, there was something wrong with this city. This poor kid who didn't know how to say *thank you* or *you're welcome* was simply a more elaborate picture of the problem; it was a nation of teenagers who hadn't grown up – bereft of tradition, pushy and bristly, spending their entire lives rolling from one side to the other,

weeping or laughing, with no connection to themselves or anyone else, all their actions lacking in context except possibly that which could be measured in money – lacking in destiny.

When he got home he tossed away the shopping bags, looked at this weekly petrol for the everyday and couldn't be bothered with it. His life was spent in unconsciousness, flowing in endless circles through a machine he'd constructed around himself. He would have to find the girl and demand his destiny, or whatever it was called. He couldn't be alone anymore. His life was lonely, empty, devoid of joy, warmth, intimacy, everything that mattered; his heart wizened. – That was how he'd started thinking, in clichés which towered above everything else in his consciousness; his heart was withering away; if he didn't do something quickly he'd lose the chance he had for transformation, and he wouldn't come back.

He stopped trailing along the coast, headed straight into the centre, sat down in a café where he could see out into Laugavegur and kept a lookout for the girl until it started to get dark, then he sat there with a beer in front of him, the exhilarating effect of which took him remarkably by surprise; he hadn't had a drink in a long time – he'd wanted to keep a firm hold on as many of his thoughts as possible, get his bearings.

“What a mistake,” he muttered and had started giggling once more, which only got worse as he wondered what this would look like to anyone else; there he sat on his own, pale with dark circles underneath his eyes, giggling to himself, wasn't this how weirdos behaved? – He went to a bar, one of the places he knew she frequented, until the place filled up. She was nowhere to be seen. He then popped into two other bars

close by, but she wasn't there either. He met an old acquaintance, sat and talked about something he couldn't recall – Halldór Laxness and death – the next thing he knew, he was heading to an afterparty with a guy and two girls who weren't her. Then he woke up the next day in a house behind Bergstadastræti and started over again. Inside him, there was a strength he hadn't known for a long time; however chaotic his life had become, he finally felt as if he *wanted* something.

Chapter 9

He was sitting in the café by Laugavegur and keeping a look-out for the girl. He had picked up a newspaper – it was the first time in several months he'd read any of the papers – and on page 7, underneath the heading “Investigation Closed”, it was as if something moved inside him, as if he knew. He read:

The Reykjavík Police Force has closed their inquiry into the death of a young woman. The woman was found dead by the art work Sólfarid two weeks ago, and Sæbraut was shut for traffic during the investigation. At first, police would not rule out the involvement of a second party in the woman's death, but closer investigation revealed the death to have been a suicide.

It was her. He knew before he'd even read the article. It was as if for the past few weeks, his life had been heading directly and inevitably to this point. He went and got all the newspapers from the rack and spread them out on the table, turning the pages back in time until he found the first article about the case, towards bottom left on page 4 in Morgunbladid, under the heading “Police refusing to comment”:

Traffic through the western part of Sæbraut was halted yesterday morning between 8 and 10 a.m. because of a police investigation, causing great delay to traffic from the west side of Reykjavík. The cause of the operation is believed to have been a suicide near the art work Sólfarid, just north of Sæbraut. According to witnesses, police stopped traffic around 8 a.m., numerous passers-by having earlier phoned emergency services to report

a person seemingly hanging by a rope from the art work. Sources say circumstances do not rule out the possibility of an unlawful killing. As of yet, police are refusing to make any comment on the investigation.

He wondered confusingly whether she'd been killed, what they meant by that. But that was a ridiculous idea, he didn't know why, he just knew, like the second article then confirmed: "closer investigation revealed ... suicide ..."

The last time he'd met the girl – when she had spoken of her lack of destiny – had been a Sunday, two days before the article was written.

She'd gotten up the dutch courage to do it; maybe that was all she'd been doing the entire time he'd known her. She had killed herself. In the unlikely event that someone could have possessed enough fury to kill this tiny creature, she would have been able to fend them off if she saw fit. She was capable of anything. And he was certain that this was precisely how she would have killed herself, in this dramatic, inconsiderate, beautiful – and pretentious way. It was her.

He looked up and saw a pint of beer in front of him. A waiter said something and touched the newspapers on the table but he didn't listen, looked at the beer, at the golden clarity and the bubbles like pearls that the beer was weaving to the world and sending up from the bottom; he could smell the beer and it reminded him of her.

Then he started having doubts. Despite her talk of suicide, he wasn't sure she'd been so far gone as to act on it. He drank some more, got permission to use the phone at the café and rang the police. They took his name but wouldn't give him any information.

He started collecting all the papers from the preceding weeks from the waiters' staff room and the racks by the windows to find the obituaries, and whether it was his phone call or the waiters wanting to get rid of him, two police officers turned up, led him out of the café and took him to the station where he was shown into an office; a cramped, tobacco-stained office which smelled like his old primary school.

He spoke to the CID who'd been in charge of the case, a middle-aged man with big eyes which had an almost impossibly cheerful glint to them, considering what he did for a living and the walls within which he'd locked himself. The man apologized for having had him picked up like this, but claimed to be interested in his connection to the girl.

"There are a few loose ends that need tying up," he said, "to make the report look nicer. This case attracted a lot of attention, you see." He asked in detail about Emil's relationship with the girl, how often they'd seen each other and where, and when they'd last met. Emil answered and tried to be as honest as he could.

"Just friends, you say?" the man interrupted him. "That sounds fun. You and this pretty girl ... And I can see you're not married," he said, gave a little laugh and clicked at his computer. "Have you got a girlfriend? Or other female friends?" Emil shook his head and asked how that mattered.

"According to a friend, she's been seeing someone for several months, a married man whom she'd sometimes visit. His wife worked nights. Does this ring a bell?"

"I don't know ... No."

“Is it possible that she was talking about you but changing the facts, for some reason?”

“I don’t know ... I don’t see why she would have. But maybe someone noticed her disappearing like that ... overnight, when she was staying at my house. And maybe she didn’t want to try and explain our relationship ... Did she have a lot of friends, by the way?”

“Shouldn’t you know more about that than I do?”

“We never spoke of such things ...”

“Strange!” the policeman said. “Strange sort of relationship you two had. And you’re saying you never had sex?”

“Never.” Emil shook his head.

“There aren’t any problems in that department? For you, I mean?”

“No.” He kept on shaking his head, could see how the man was trying to provoke him into saying something. “At least not last time I checked.”

“Hahah, you’re a joker,” the man laughed. Emil liked him less and less. “But with regard to friends, no, it seems to me she mostly had acquaintances. And not much intimacy, except maybe of a sexual nature.” He laughed again. “Actually, she seems to have mostly surrounded herself with drunks and artists, if there’s any difference between the two in the world she inhabited. – People of the firework sort; they live stupidly and quickly, they burn out – maybe the sooner the better! You’re not involved in the arts at

all, are you?" The man smiled. *The firework sort*. Emil felt numb but could hear himself ask about the suspicion that she'd been murdered.

"It's unlikely, son. The initial suspicions had to do with the rope she used to hang herself with. The rope was a fairly uncommon mix of silk and wool. Later we found out that it had been taken from backstage at the opera house, where she'd been drinking earlier that night. And she was seen leaving the opera with a man, someone other than the supposed boyfriend, and no rope in sight – until by Sólfarid the next morning ... She had sex with the man in the toilet of a bar." Emil could feel the policeman's eyes on him but he didn't stare back, just kept his eyes on the floor in front of the desk. "With regard to the rope," he then continued, "and how she moved it around, a witness came forward to place her near Sæbraut with a backpack which she seems to have hidden somewhere near the opera while she was drinking. The backpack was then found close to the art work and there were signs that the rope had been stored in it ... And then there are other factors which indicate she'd decided in advance what she was going to do, for example her behaviour that night."

"So you haven't located this boyfriend?"

"Not unless he's sitting right here in front of me! Tell me, do you get jealous easily?"

"Am I a *suspect*?" Emil asked, finally straightening up in his seat and feeling anger well up inside. The man laughed, then shook his head.

“I’m just messing with you. At least I managed to wake you up! But no, of course you haven’t done anything. I can tell just by looking at you. And that guy, well ... If he’s not you and if he’s married, I don’t suppose he’ll want to come forward. Not necessarily because he killed her, you see, but because of *how people would talk.*” He laughed and Emil finally saw that what he had taken for cheerfulness in the man’s eyes was some sort of jiggling contempt, his resignation to all the ugliness around him; he felt this strange evil radiating from the man, stood up and got permission to leave.

The girl’s name was María. Emil could in no way fit the name with the person he’d known. She’d been right, names only got in the way of what really mattered.

Chapter 10

He walked down Hverfisgata and went into a café, probably to get pissed, he didn't know yet. The weather was finally changing. First the snow turned into sleet, then rain. The drifts which had been building up every day for months became denser, then started rippling down into the sewers.

On his way out of the office he'd asked about for the names of the girl's friends or relatives, but the policeman said he wasn't allowed to give out any names. He didn't know why it mattered this much to him, but he felt like he had to meet someone who'd known her as well, preferably get hold of a photograph of the girl or something that had belonged to her. This thing they'd had going between them wasn't real enough – not when it was only located inside his head. And she couldn't just be there one day and then disappear – as if she'd never existed; it was unthinkable and he couldn't bear it.

He read the papers from around the time that the funeral had taken place. He found no obituaries about the girl, only a notice saying she'd been buried. One name was put down as family: the girl's grandmother.

He went through the papers again to make absolutely sure no obituaries had been sent in, but for some reason couldn't accept it; he rang up the paper and had this confirmed, then bickered about it with a remarkable sense of anger until the reporter said he didn't have time to keep on chatting.

“Everyone’s too busy wiping their own arses these days!” Emil shouted into the telephone, heard a hang-up tone and hung up as well; then remembered he at least had the name of her grandmother, who was registered as living on the west side of town, in a tower block close to the swimming pool. He rang her up, and without having intended to he introduced himself as María’s boyfriend. They arranged to meet up.

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The grandmother was grey-haired, crooked and wrinkly. He’d always had trouble telling one old person from another, he could see nothing but impending death in all of them. They stood awkwardly in the doorway and he looked at her face in search of any similarity to the girl.

She didn’t seem to doubt his being the girl’s boyfriend, let him in and planted him at a table in the living room. Then they drank coffee, ate cake and he looked at pictures of the girl from when she was a child. On the shelves there were framed pictures of her as a baby, and several of her with her mother who according to the grandmother had died of a drug overdose – cocaine.

“And we never knew who her dad was. But you know the whole story, I presume?” Emil nodded, even though he knew nothing. In the pictures, the girl was usually all glowing and fresh-faced – usually accompanied by her grandmother or a man

who was probably her grandfather – and Emil started having doubts. He scrutinized one photo after another but became less certain with each photo.

He asked if there were any more recent pictures of the girl.

“It’s unlikely,” the grandmother said and gave it a thought. “After the trouble started here in the city we didn’t see much of her. Before we had to give her up ... She was always shy about having her photo taken. I’ll go see ...” She disappeared somewhere behind a door and he was left behind in the living room, which was silent apart from the low murmur of a radio.

When the old lady returned she was holding a single photograph, taken in the countryside “a few years ago”.

“She was twelve ... I went to visit her at the children’s home.” Emil looked at the girl; she was standing in a field, in front of a two-storey white stone building: next to her, on top of the dry, yellow grass, there was a tangled pile of barbed wire. The look on her face was sullen, she was skinny and had dark circles underneath her eyes. He finally felt as if he recognized her but couldn’t be sure – she made him think of rotting corpses in their coffins.

He asked if he could borrow the picture to have it copied. The old woman said unfortunately she couldn’t give it away, it was the only picture she had of the girl from around that age, and repeated that she’d always been reluctant to have her photo taken. Then she opened her mouth a little, a distant look in her eyes, as if trying to decide whether or not to say something.

“I think she was harassed,” she then said, looking hard at the wall in front of her. “At the home ... Abused, as they say these days. Did she ever mention anything to you? It’s hard when you can’t ever be sure ...”

Emil shook his head. He thought of asking why they’d given her up, what would make someone send a child away into the countryside, into the hands of strangers, but felt the numbness descending upon him.

On the radio someone was talking of hiking, the beauty of the Himalayas. He wanted to get away. He asked about the funeral and found out where it had been held. Then he no longer knew why he was there. They chatted about Halldór Laxness until he excused himself and said goodbye, bought alcohol from the off-licence in Austurstræti, waded back home through the rain and started drinking.

He passed out on his floor, clutching the picture he’d stolen from the grandmother in the palm of his hand; the girl’s pale face, her withered body, hands folded across the belly. Yet another lone grass in the Icelandic wasteland. The photo wasn’t enough, but now at least he knew what he had to do.

Chapter 11

When Emil woke up the next day, the phone book lay open on the floor, drunken pencil scribbles next to names beginning with an M. He'd been trying to get a hold of Martin but couldn't remember his last name, and now that he came to think of it he felt it was unlikely that Martin would have a phone. He was going to ask for help with something, but as soon as he thought of this something it was as if a wall went up between him and the world – or rather, between him and what he *wanted*. He shook off the idea.

He decided to try and track down the flat where she'd lived. Her grandmother hadn't mentioned the address, but at some point she'd spoken of a tower block by the small boat harbour.

The harbour was deserted apart from a tourist couple taking pictures of the boats, and a boy who sat scratching at the ground with a stick. The snow had almost completely disappeared during the night, the temperature was above zero and it was still raining.

Across the street from the harbour there was a big, white tower block Emil had probably always known existed but never really looked at. The building had six floors and curved alongside the road; its front had many entrances, some of the doors were unmarked and looked like they might lead to just about anything; luxurious flats or empty storage spaces.

He started by going into the restaurant across the street, Sægreifinn, and there he asked an old man if he knew whether there were flats in the building that were rented

out. The man said yes and pointed out one of the entrances. Emil said he was looking for a girl, and when he described her the old man said he'd often talked to her, she'd sometimes come over to his restaurant for a meal.

“What do you want to talk to her for?” the old man asked with a smile, his eyes *sparkling* as if he was already getting ideas about *young love*. Emil wanted to say she was dead, to spit it into the face of this world which would chop down its inhabitants by random. *We never asked to be here*, he thought, and it dawned on him that the only possible reaction to life must be to wage war on it with all your rage and contempt, and actually he was surprised that he'd never thought of this before, sitting at home fiddling with his little letters, putting them together to form his inconsequential little essay on Halldór Laxness – not a *Nobel Prize winner*, but yet another poor soul who'd been kicked into the room of life, cut up and tortured for a few decades – a fleeting moment in this world's blazing fire of death – but then kicked out again, forgotten like everyone else within a few hundred years.

Emil giggled to himself, crossed the street, walked in through the entrance the old man had pointed out to him, and tracked down the caretaker. Emil introduced himself as the girl's boyfriend and the caretaker's entire attitude immediately became humble and helpful, as if death lent a certain softness and glow to human interaction, otherwise completely absent from daily life. Emil said he wanted to have a look at the girl's flat to make sure nothing had been left behind. They entered a small lift which took them up to the fourth floor, into a long hallway with nearly fifteen doors on either side, all of them green. The hallway was quiet, no clattering of dishes or children wailing, no music or

conversation coming through the doors. Emil asked if there were flats behind all those doors and felt as if he'd stumbled into some mysterious recess of the city.

"Studio flats," the caretaker said. "Which is actually a pretty fancy word for some of these rooms."

"And who rents these flats?" Emil had trouble hiding his surprise, or the incomprehensible burning inside; probably it was the thought of everything he didn't know about the girl's life, and never would know.

"You never came to visit your girlfriend?" the caretaker asked, his voice suddenly tainted with suspicion. Emil shook his head, said he'd been tied down with work at home and she'd usually come over to his place.

"She never liked this place very much," he said, and the caretaker resumed his sympathetic expression.

"Of course not ..." He hummed vaguely. "Most of these rooms – I mean the least bad ones, like the one she was renting – were probably never meant to be anything other than temporary accommodation. And most of them are rented out to tourists through travel agents. They like the view. But then I've never been able to figure out where some of the doors here lead. Me, the caretaker!" He laughed pretentiously. Emil felt as if this was a softer version of a speech he'd often delivered before, probably to his friends – over booze in some grey stable or other, in one of those *grey suburbs*, where they wanked off over pornographic calendars, sometimes luring in teenagers, getting them drunk on moonshine, giving them rohypnol and raping the girls through their mouths and

their tight, little, dry vaginas. “And these *characters* who disappear through them,” he continued, “maybe meeting other *characters* ... I don’t know what goes on here, but I’ve stumbled across this and that ... Don’t let yourself be fooled by the silence.”

They came to a stop in front of one of those green doors. Towards the top of the door there was a sign with the number 50. The caretaker opened the door and Emil stepped into the empty room, which probably only measured around twenty square metres. The silence in there was lighter and more Sunday-esque than out in the hallway, but he couldn’t shake off the sense of misery that came from fitting the girl into this room.

To the right there was a door, leading to a toilet, and by one of the walls there were some worktops, a sink and two hobs for plugging in. The only piece of furniture was a small double bed, which the caretaker said had come with the flat.

The window faced out to the small boat harbour and it was true, the view was what you would describe as beautiful.

He saw no sign of the girl, which disappointed him. He’d been hoping to maybe find an item or some clothes that she’d left behind. He turned to the caretaker, made himself look broken and said all explanations would probably sound daft, but that he wanted to rent the flat for a while, at least until the contract ran out.

“The contracts round here vary quite a bit,” said the caretaker, impassively looking out the window, towards the bay and Mount Esja. “I guess I’ll need to ask around ... With

the travel agents.” Emil pulled out a five thousand krónur note, handed it to him and said he’d give him some more later.

“When I get a contract, in my own name.” The caretaker agreed, said he thought he could overtake the old lease, and that he’d try and stop the flat from being rented out to tourists over the summer.

“I gather they pay more. It’s a tough market.” He slipped the money into his pocket and went out into the hallway. Emil asked the caretaker to let him know how things turned out, said he’d stay for a while and have a look round, they said goodbye and the caretaker shut the door behind him.

Emil sat on the window sill and looked around the empty room, inhaled deeply, breathed in her smell, of which he thought there was a trace in the room. Then he lay down on the bed, stroked his fingers slowly across the mattress and felt the cold oozing off it.

Chapter 12

After the snow disappeared the city became dark, so dark Emil sometimes felt as if the darkness was clinging to him, covering his face, the fingers, flowing through his veins.

He was having a pint in one of the cafés on Laugavegur, scanning the street in search of Martin, but hadn't seen him. Actually he couldn't remember ever having seen Martin in broad daylight, or outside the cemetery or the Ljósvallagata flat. Maybe he wouldn't even recognize him, not out of context like this.

The beer brought him courage and once more Emil knew he'd know no peace if he didn't put it into action. – Don't think, *take action!* He'd always spent too much time thinking. If Martin didn't react well to the idea, he'd be prepared to beg, humiliate himself, offer money, the flat even, everything he had. Because he knew he couldn't do it on his own.

Probably the simplest way would be the best: going back to his place, sitting down by the kitchen window and keeping an eye on the cemetery. But he was too restless to sit at home, he couldn't stay there anymore. He felt as if he needed to keep moving. – Like tuna fish; if they slowed down below twenty kilometres an hour, their blood went cold and they died.

He left the café, wandered around the Thingholt area looking at the houses and gardens, occasionally scanning the flowerbeds for earthworms, laughing to himself over a witty sentence he made up about the old town: *Reykjavík – made of corrugated iron by*

incorrigible people. After an hour's walk his ears had started buzzing from the oxygen, the darkness was tainted with tones of grey and the cold drizzle was making his face numb, as if cling film had been wrapped around his head.

He was walking near the Einar Jónsson Museum when he spotted Martin, recognizing him from far off by his walk. Martin was ambling, hands in pockets, as if he had nothing specific on the cards.

"Hello there, my friend!" Emil shouted when a few metres remained between them.

"What are you doing here?" Martin said.

"What are *you* doing here?" Emil said and they laughed.

"I'm a man about town, as you know ... Are you drunk?" Martin kept on laughing and seemed surprised to see Emil out and about.

"Just a couple of beers. You didn't think I was a drinker?"

"Hm ... I guess not. I've never seen you drink. Special occasion?"

"No. Not at all. That's how I like it best." Emil laughed. He found it almost unbearably amusing to meet his friend again; yes, his friend, they had to be more than mere acquaintances. "I was just hoping to see you," he continued and lifted up his bag. "I've got some beer I thought we could drink together, maybe down by the pond or something. Are you in a hurry?"

Martin said he hadn't been going anywhere in particular. They started walking down Skólavörðustígur, heading towards the pond.

"I have something I need to discuss with you," Emil said, his voice probably a bit shaky – from the sudden angst washing over him.

"What about? Are you alright?"

"Yes, yes. Everything's fine. I'm sorry if it sounds strange. I'll tell you everything later. Once we've sat down."

They walked together in silence, maybe a bit awkwardly, until Martin said he'd just come from Nordurmýri.

"From the garage where I keep my worms."

"What were you doing there? Feeding the worms?" Emil asked and found the question strange, without knowing why. It was as if everything they said was somehow distorted; as if the words they chose were completely different from those they'd always used with each other. Martin said yes. Emil asked how many worms there were, couldn't remember if he'd been told before. Martin said he thought there were around thirty thousand of them.

"I've probably never asked you this before," Emil continued, "but do you make a lot of money from this? Or is it something you do in order to be independent –"

"Millions, my friend. No worries there. Now I'll soon buy my house, my house of worms, and move into the real estate racket."

“Millions?”

“Yes. Maybe the takings are that big because nobody thinks it’s possible, and therefore there aren’t many people in the business. People who are heading off on a fishing trip usually buy their worms last minute, on the way out of town, and they’re willing to pay almost any price. Even though the price is normally manageable, it’s obviously far too high for something that just pops out of the earth all over the city when it rains – hundreds of thousands or millions of worms.”

“Of course ...” Emil said, mulling it over. He hadn’t thought of it like that before.

“And when it doesn’t rain much during the summer, the price goes up, especially with people like me who grow their own – plenty of supply when nobody else has a single worm. That’s the difference between being a picker and a grower.”

“A picker, aha,” Emil said and could tell he was slurring his words. “Then why do you pick worms as well, since you grow them?”

“Because I enjoy it,” Martin said and smiled. “I enjoy having a look around.”

“And the ministers’ daughters, perhaps,” Emil said, more to himself than Martin, and laughed into his can, drained it, scrunched it up between his hands and threw it on the pavement. *You scruffy idiot*, he thought, and his entire mood had changed from a few minutes earlier; he couldn’t understand why he kept on living.

They walked the rest of the way in silence, came to the pond and sat down on one of the benches in the Hljómskálagardur park, close to the statue of Jónas Hallgrímsson

hidden behind a bush. Emil wondered why there was no statue of Halldór Laxness anywhere. Or of death? What would a statue of death look like? – The plaque with the name of the piece, the artist's name, and a pedestal for *nothing*?

Emil pulled a can from his plastic bag and handed it to Martin. They had a look around. The park was bleak and dark, the dry grass yellow and tattered, and spread across the grass there were puddles like holes in the ground.

"I started thinking about spring today," Martin said. "And newly mown grass." Emil felt as if Martin wanted to cheer him up. He tried to rid his head of the thought of what he was going to ask. "I hardly ever think about my teens, except when I smell newly mown grass – then it's like it all comes back to me in the blink of an eye. Might sound a bit impersonal: newly mown grass. But still. Everything I seem to have done in the vicinity of newly mown grass –"

"Life in general seems to be connected with grass, or earth, rather," Emil interrupted.

"Maybe. Sometimes I dream of grass, piercingly green as it normally is in Iceland. The grass over here is unusually green in summer ... Maybe everyone on this island is a sheep; the first were let out of a barge around 1940. At the end of the gangway we went through a machine which hypnotized us to be pleased with ourselves, and this bragging was called being an Icelander – in that way we'd get fatter and tastier. And then we're all over here, grazing on our shiny green grass and thinking everything is pretty damn good, but then suddenly we get slaughtered and sold in markets in London and New York: "Special Icelandic sheep. Raised and fed on Reykjavík's pastures.""

“You’re a right joker,” Emil said and hummed. They stayed silent for a while but then Martin asked why they were sitting there.

“What were you going to talk about? The look on your face seems to indicate it’s something bad. I don’t know what it could be ... But I doubt it could be any worse than what I’m starting to imagine.”

“It’s the girl,” Emil said and instantly felt like he’d sobered up. “... She’s dead.”

“Dead? The girl who used to come and visit you at night?”

Emil nodded. “It doesn’t matter, or well, *this* wasn’t what I meant to discuss with you. It’s been a while since she died, the funeral’s already happened ... Her mother was a bit of a mess when she had the kid, they never knew who the dad was and then the mother died. I met her grandmother and talked to her and saw some old pictures but you see, I can’t be sure that it’s her. I never knew her name.”

“How did she die?” Martin had stood up and was walking in slow circles in front of the bench, boring his eyes into the ground.

“She hung herself.”

“And why aren’t you sure it was her? So you’re not sure she’s dead?”

“No, I’m not sure.”

“Didn’t you say you’d seen pictures? At her grandmother’s house?”

“Only from when she was younger ... The photos looked like her, I thought at first, but then I saw this look on her face and I wasn’t sure anymore. That’s why I wanted to talk to you, you see. *That’s why.*”

“That’s why ...? I don’t quite understand, my friend.”

“Because I want you to help me identify her, or fetch her. We’ll go to the cemetery and open up the coffin so I can see her ...” Martin came to a halt in front of him and they looked each other in the eye. “I know this doesn’t sound good, or sensible,” Emil continued, “but I feel like I’m losing it, you know? I never knew who she was, then she dies and if it isn’t her that means the other one’s still out there and I could find her, if I really tried. And the other thing I’m almost more frightened of is if she comes knocking on my door one night, standing there in the doorway –”

Martin interrupted him, said he still couldn’t understand what he was on about, or why he felt a need to see the body. “There must be people still alive who knew her, have pictures of her. Maybe she has entire photo albums on the internet, for example –”

“Not her,” Emil said, knowing he could probably have done something more, but still there was something within him telling him it was hopeless. He heard himself begin to lie, without really understanding why. He told Martin he’d followed every possible lead to friends, acquaintances, relatives; then he mentioned the abuse at the children’s home and how the girl had refused to be photographed, been secretive, had few friends.

They silently emptied their cans. Emil suddenly felt he could discern this exoticness there was about Martin, which he’d pondered before; he was proud, without

being arrogant or having to blow his own horn at the expense of others, and happy – not because of the things that surrounded him, but inside; in a sense it was as if he'd *accepted himself*, in a way which didn't involve exclusion or a simple ethical code; he had formed a connection to the world and analyzed this connection, supported by a culture – exotic to the Icelandic culture and necessarily so. Emil found this disturbing, when he thought about it; it practically made him queasy, and gave him a sense of impotence which he felt could easily turn into hatred.

After a long silence, Martin said he'd help him – but immediately, before he'd have time to regret it.

"I'll only ask you this once: You're certain you can't figure it out through some other means? – Or that I can't help you with this in any other way?"

"I'm certain."

"Okay. Then we'll go visit her. You take a peek, then she goes back in." Emil nodded. Martin glanced at him out of the corner of his eye and started laughing, closed his eyes and laughed.

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Afterwards Emil discovered just how badly he'd planned the operation, possibly because he'd never actually expected Martin to agree to it. First of all they needed a car to get to

the cemetery and back home. When he told Martin this he cursed, but then carried on with his bubbling, slightly tiresome laughter.

“I’ll take care of it, no worries,” he said and patted Emil’s shoulder. They walked together through Thingholt and into the Nordurmýri area, finished their beers and both of them seemed to be glowing from a force propelling them along the pavement, their bodies light and numb.

Martin disappeared into a flat on Mánagata, came out with car keys, walked over to the garage of worms, unlocked multiple locks and chains, and fetched them a rope and two shovels. Emil didn’t want to see the inside of the garage.

On their way to Mánagata they’d discussed the “condition” of the girl. She’d been buried while the earth was still frosty, and despite the thaw over the last two days she’d probably still be well preserved, at least well enough for her face to be recognizable.

They drove off towards Gufunes cemetery where the girl had been buried, and stopped at a drive-through kiosk where Emil bought some cigarettes and started to chainsmoke. Martin talked about a Polish writer who’d dedicated his life to death, but Emil wasn’t paying attention; he looked out the window at the suburbs streaming by with their alleys and shopping centres and car parks.

After consulting a map on a sign they came across, they parked the car behind a dumpster at the edge of the cemetery and walked over to a corner where the new graves were located. The night was moonlit enough for them to be able to read the headstones without using a torch, and soon they found the girl’s name on a plain white cross. Where

the arms of the cross met, there was a small, golden plaque, engraved with her name, date of birth and date of death.

They fetched their shovels and started digging. It went quickly, the grave had been recently dug, the soil was wet and easily tackled. When they'd dug down to their waists they took turns down in the hole while the other kept an eye out for passers-by.

As they got further down, the soil became denser and laced with cold, but it didn't matter anymore because they had glimpsed the coffin. They forced the lid open and Martin peeked into the coffin to check if everything was "alright", he said – which Emil found so hilarious he had to struggle to keep in the laughter, crouched down there in the dark, having to keep a tight grip on a protruding chunk of earth to stop himself from falling into the coffin. Then Martin climbed out of the grave, passed him the torch and told him to hurry up.

"But don't come back up until you're *certain*, my friend. Now that we've come this far we might as well do it properly."

But what if I can never be sure? Emil thought as he pulled the lid over, stuck his head underneath it and turned on the torch. It took him a while to get used to the light and the ivory skin. He studied the face, traced a finger across her neck; a black line across the whiteness. Her smell was sweet, but then it became something more; he inhaled it deeply, felt his senses narrowing down to a single point, wanting to be dissolved. He closed his eyes, stopped striving to hold himself back, felt the pervading, constant fear finally begin to recede, felt the words being lifted off him, and he fell or flew through this

void that was opening up to him. He could no longer have any doubts. It was her – like a glowing, silent snowstorm.

He didn't know for how long he lay there with his face up to hers, breathing in the light and the smell of her, but suddenly Martin was pulling him out of the hole. They shovelled darkness into darkness, then they were sitting in the car on their way back to town.

The night after, Emil came back to the grave in a car he'd rented and started digging again, but this time he was on his own.

Chapter 13

He decided to sell the Ljósvallagata flat. The money he owned would run out in a month or two unless he took some action. His life couldn't get much more frugal. And his flat reminded him too much of the girl – as she'd been, not the way she had become, in her essence and finality. The flat was too vulgar, full to the brim with conversation and memories and it flickered all around him, as if awfully desperate to please him but unsure how to act.

By paying more on the side he got the caretaker's help with renting the studio flat down by the harbour, and he realized that what he'd been aiming for wasn't to keep the flat for a little while, like he'd told himself to begin with – not to stop tourists from coming there to soil her memory with their lack of character – rather, he wanted to move in there. In this small flat he sensed her absence the most strongly, and he felt good there – just another doorknob on that long, silent hallway where nobody minded their neighbour's business.

In one of the suburbs he went to an electronics store where everything was yellow, and bought a cooling unit which he plugged in and kept underneath the bed where she lay, normally wrapped in a duvet. To begin with he was ill a lot but he reacted by putting on layers, eating paracetamol and drinking a lot of tea – a mixture of lemon and ginger he'd buy from the 10-11 store in the city centre. She looked good. But sometimes he thought of her as a sort of battery and could feel the anxiety revolve through his stomach like a burning sun; each time the temperature in the room rose

above zero – an indulgence he sometimes allowed himself – her energy went down. He seemed to remember a concept from physics which described this state and one morning it came back to him: *S*, or *entropia*, chaos – her chaos value increased and the atoms flittered further away from each other, drifting into the void as energy. And death – as contradictory as that seemed – was moving further away from him, fading, evaporating and irradiating away, literally disappearing in front of his eyes.

Thus she started disappearing, or *he* did; with every passing day she moved further away from him, but the pain this brought on wasn't precisely bad; rather, it was as if it gave meaning to even the most trivial events, time didn't just pass aimlessly, everything had a *meaning* – each moment they had together there in the flat mattered; life was fraught with death.

A few weeks after he moved into the flat he bought some kind of fluid over the Internet – a new generation of “preserver” – to keep her in a bath tub and thus avoid the cold. But the smell of the fluid made him nauseous, and when he dipped her fingers into a bowlful of it the colour of her skin changed, the pure paleness was distorted into the sickly, washed-out colour of dead grass.

He had become one of those *characters*, he then thought one day as he saw the caretaker watch him entering the lift. Underneath his arm he was carrying a packet of filters and a can of cooling liquid to pour into the unit. The caretaker had made a comment about the electricity usage of the building having gone up since he'd moved in, but Emil said he wasn't doing anything apart from watching television and typing on his laptop. He claimed to be writing an essay.

He stopped thinking about changes. This was what it would be like, to the end. He kept the flat just below zero. The chaos value. The cooling unit. Her lips were blue, like the sky above Thingvellir. He lay next to her, thawing the very surface of her lips with his lips, his breath; holding the palms of his hands above her breasts until tiny droplets rose out of her skin like pearls of sweat, sports stadiums, retail parks or shopping centres in the wasteland that was the city – his love strong enough for both of them. Never before had he so completely given himself over to someone, and he knew this was what his life – the wait – had been heading towards.

He slept in a sleeping bag on the bathroom floor, doors kept shut to protect him from the cold. When he woke up he would usually take a walk, drink some coffee and eat something from the 10-11 store or at Kaffi París, which was expensive, but after the Ljósvallagata flat had been sold he had money which would probably last him for longer than he could be bothered to keep this going. It would come to an end, which was good. Everything came to an end. Everything disappeared, crumbled, decayed, was swept away, everybody died and he'd stopped waiting, he'd walk the last few steps on his own and on his own initiative.

He undressed and lay down next to her, kissed all the way down her body, licked the vulva and then lowered himself on top of her, felt as if he was numbing into her, reaching a windswept, icy peak and becoming nothing – together.

Chapter 14

Spring came and then summer. Everything that had been in his grandfather's flat was put in storage or given away to a charity shop, all but a few of his books, a small roll-up mattress and what few clothes Emil had. He laboured through Thomas Mann. Although he was no longer getting ill, he kept on buying ginger from 10-11 which he used to brew tea; he would drink it and watch the steam rise from the cup, breath steam onto the window and draw pictures in the steam, round heads, mouths and eyes which trickled down as the steam got denser and cooler.

He'd often stand by the window looking out, down at the street where cars endlessly rolled past except in the very middle of the night, watching tourists gather around the ticket booths for the whale watching boats, watching the people eating at Sægreifinn – life streaming past him; a background hum during weekdays but screams, laughter, cries and hysteria during the rush of the weekend binges. And there was nothing he missed; no discourse he wasn't through with, no desires or ambitions he hadn't calculated all the way to their eventual outcome: *dissatisfaction*. He stopped the chase, saw the hole in the centre of everything and slipped into it, drifting through the air like a leaf, a vague murmur, a wisened shape; from then on merely living to satisfy his one basic desire which at the same time was the driving force of time: the desire for death.

He had appeared out of nothing. He wanted to disappear. There was no coherence in anything. He didn't write anymore. Sometimes he would read the newspaper which came in piles through the letter box. He thought how the world was full of crap

multiplying itself, dead trees becoming paper becoming a dead culture, dead actions, dead words aiming for nothing, meaning nothing, dead people speaking dead words and spinning, famous dead people spreading death and spinning; how many caretakers were there carrying junk from letter boxes to rubbish bins, how many people would have stopped missing him since he went missing. He read about bankers' birthday parties, read opinion pieces about TV programmes, numbers from the national statistics bureau, saw a photograph of people shopping. What was the goal of consumption? – Surrounding yourself with objects, diving into them, smearing yourself with them, hiding, erasing yourself. Once a week, sometimes more frequently, he'd turn off the cooling unit. He would sit by the end of the bed looking up between the girl's legs, think of all the words that had come out of her while she lived, how silent she now was and how silent bodies generally were, without the air being sucked into them and coming out again as words; how silence made bodies bigger, expanded them up to sizes which devoured subjectivities, ideas, world views. The lower part of her body – the buttocks, back and the back of her thighs – was a dark purple; blood had gathered there and set inside her. Her inner labia was dark and almost black, pushing far beyond the vulva like a Rafflesia flower attempting to break through the surface. Sometimes he thought she might suddenly turn inside out, in one conclusive movement – that what was inside her wanted to get out. He licked her all over, buried his face deep inside her and thought about families on shopping trips to the various shopping centres, licked the dad's face speaking austerely into a mobile phone, the mum's face looking at window displays, licked the child's pale face screaming in a pram, licked its eyes and lips and nose and ears, licked the nation's progress, its affordability, the national debt, the gross national product, the rental

market, licked all of Halldór Laxness, his fingers and face, licked his ambition on behalf of the nation, licked the manager of Kaupthing Bank all over on the way to the airport, licked the manager of Glitnir Bank, his attitude, the pioneer ethics, the daring, the portinacity, his portfolio, his music taste, the speeches at his 50th, licked the news, Morgunbladid's editorial board, the TV announcers, the government, licked the dams, the hydroelectric power plants, the highlands, the panel shows, licked everyone who got pissed or didn't, those who had expectations, were having a good time or hating it all, licked people's keenness, their jokes, suffering, desires, fading numbly into it all.

One day he was standing by the window looking out over the harbour when he thought he could see the girl. She was sitting at one of the tables in front of the restaurant.

He went outside, stumbled across the street and inbetween cars like an old tree. She was getting up when he reached the table, holding a bag and talking to another girl who had to be her friend. He was watching everything that took place from above – all this empty space surrounding the dots appearing on the earth, moving around her and blinking away. They'd been sitting at a table that was too big for them, eating soup from deep, white dishes which were also too big, and scattered among the whiteness he could see the leftovers of what they'd been eating; pearls of fat and greyish tatters of fish. They turned towards him. The girl relaxed her face, smoothing it down when she saw him, lifted her hands along her sides and upwards, momentarily held them motionless in the air, then filled up her face with lines and waves.

“You!” she shouted and let out a quick laugh. “I can’t believe it ...Where have you been?!” She looked surprised and happy – he couldn’t remember how that felt, and then there was something else he couldn’t quite place. Her eyes shone and gleamed and moved to and fro, she was teeming with quick little movements and he felt as if hot, smothering blood was surging through her face and the world and colouring the sky red. “I’ve been trying to find you ... For ages! I went to that flat on Ljósvallagata but they told me you’d moved. And I never knew who to talk to. I also tried finding your parents, or your friends. But I never found anyone.”

She went quiet. They stayed silent and he took his eyes off her to look towards her friend, who was quiet as well but immediately began to avoid his eyes. She was afraid. He noted her awkward movements, how she moved – gliding slowly from side to side through her hips, attempting to keep her eyes fixed on the ground but still they moved, they kept shooting up and down and to the sides, there was no inertia, everything moved – the saccades of the eyes. The friend said something he couldn’t hear, went into the restaurant and he was left behind with the dead girl who kept on talking; he attempted to ignore it although he knew he couldn’t keep it up much longer, he’d have to say something.

“– really wanted to meet you,” she was saying. He didn’t know why he’d run outside, or what was being expected of him. “I wanted to talk to you ... See how you were, you know. And also thank you for having helped me out, this one time. You might not know it but –”

“*This one time?*” Emil interrupted and finally found something to say. “One time?” He wanted to giggle but managed to stop himself.

“You look a bit tired, you know ...” she said. “Are you alright?” Her face began to move again, then froze momentarily. He laughed and at last it was like something became unstuck, a slight opening appeared in the stupor and he stuck out his head.

“Of course I’m *alright*,” he said. “I always get through. Still just *working*. Same old!”

“The essay?”

He said yes. They were quiet together. He and *the dead girl*. Then she said she’d gone into hospital to undergo treatment for alcoholism.

“I couldn’t let you know. The follow-up treatment lasted a month. I wasn’t allowed to talk to anyone, and you didn’t have a phone. I didn’t want you to worry about me.”

He stayed silent. All the memories came back to him in one point which was going to expand across the world – or the horribly, embarrassingly small part of it he could see – fill up everything. He’d have to start moving. The girl’s face looked like she didn’t know who to be anymore and he didn’t know either, no more than he knew what they were doing there, why anything in his life had ever been the way it was.

“We’ve just been out for a meal,” the girl said, nodding towards the big table and the big soup dishes. Then she added that they – she and the friend, he assumed – were going on a boat trip; a whale watching trip.

“That’s nice!” he blurted, loudly and with a rhythm that indicated something more was about to come out, and he felt as if he was going to continue – he had to do it, and finally he lost control: “Or you could just go home, pick up a fork and jab it into a *socket!*” he spat into her face, whirled around and walked away quickly. She called something out to him but he covered his ears, ran up to the grey church by Landakot, walked out to the cemetery and sat down on one of the benches, looking up at the window of his old flat.

It wasn’t her, he thought, moving his eyes between branches, seeing them bending underneath the snow in his head. Not *her*. Then he looked at the headstone which was closest to him. It was faded; the letters only vague depressions so you could no longer see who was lying there in the ground. He stared into the stone until he felt like the light was everywhere and he had to squint.

Through the shape which dissolves and disappears, god shines.