

Iceland Now

RESEARCHED AND INTRODUCED BY JASON RANON URI ROTSTEIN

from *An Interview With Sjón*

Sjón (b. 1962) published his first poetry collection, *Sínir (Visions)*, at fifteen. He was one of the founding members of the neo-surrealist group Medúsa and has published numerous poetry collections and eight novels, as well as writing plays, libretti and picture books for children. His long-time collaboration with the Icelandic singer Björk led to an Oscar nomination for his lyrics for the Lars von Trier movie *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). Together they wrote the opening song for the 2004 Athens Olympics. His latest collection *söngur steinasafnarans (the song of the stone collector)* was nominated for the Icelandic Literary Prize in 2007. In 2005 he won the Nordic Council's Literary Prize for his novel *Skugga-Baldur (The Blue Fox)*, which was long-listed for the 2009 Independent Foreign Fiction Prize. In 2007/08 Sjón was Samuel Fischer Guest Professor at the Freie Universität in Berlin.

JRUR: Where are the intellectuals today in Iceland and what is the specific intellectual need in the community?

Well, I just wonder if there has ever been a real position for the intellectuals in Icelandic society. Traditionally, we are a society where everybody has the right to voice his or her opinion about whatever is happening here. And it doesn't matter if you come from the academe or if you come from the arts, if you are the foreman of the plumber's union, or if you are simply a disgruntled or unhappy bank clerk somewhere, everybody has access to the dialogue through the newspapers. I think this makes the situation here a little bit different from what you can expect in other countries. I mean, most of the voices you see in newspapers, for example, are the so-called ordinary people, the laymen; and, I think, for me this is a very healthy situation. Of course, we have the tradition from the forties and fifties of some key intellectuals, key writers, taking part in social discourse, and, mainly, Halldór Laxness. Earlier on and then in the Seventies you had some [people], especially writers from the left-side, voicing their opinions about this and that and trying to influence the discussion. So I think it's a tricky thing to approach.

POETRY REVIEW 'Our Disappearing World'

And I think Icelandic writers, for example, are quite weary of how they should position themselves in the discussion; because most writers I think really don't feel that their voice should have any bigger status than the voice of the cleaning woman who feels the urge to write to the newspapers about the latest legislation in the parliament. So for me that is the landscape, you know. And I personally took very early on a stance against stepping into the social discussion because I really feel that if writers want to have an impact they should do it through their writings and with the tools of literature. And I sincerely believe that the minute a writer writes a piece for the newspaper he has ceased to use the tools of literature – even though he spices it with poetry and funny or clever metaphors and witty irony – or whatever he uses. In most cases, I would say in 99% of the cases, the writer has ceased to be a literary writer and has become some sort of a social analyst or a journalist or whatever. So right from the beginning my position has been to express my ideas about how the society should function, and where the society should go and what should be the basic moral elements of the society; from the beginning, I've only wanted to do this through my writing.

So nothing has changed really since the crash for you in terms of your writing? Do you notice a change in your writing? Do you see yourself even obliquely dealing with some of the issues at stake?

I obviously know that this will find its way into what I write. But I also feel that I have, let's say for the last ten, twelve, fifteen years, been writing about the elements that brought this crash on. And I think for most writers they have already been dealing with those elements in society and in our psychological makeup, in the psychological makeup, of the people living here. [...]

But having said all that, also, I've never understood why writers answer to the call of politicians and academics – *to do this and that*. And obviously after the crash there has been a lot of demand that writers do this and that. "Oh now we the writers should write to the newspapers, now the writers should deal with this in their poems. Now the writers should do this and that..." I've always completely hated this idea of the writers doing this and that. Writers should be exploring society through literary tools and thereby exploring also the tools of literature. But having said all that, it is obvious that this discussion about what has happened is already taking place in the theatre. And it seems that the theatre has responded quite fast, and I would say efficiently and

POETRY REVIEW 'Our Disappearing World'

effectively, to what is happening. Actually I have just finished a play that will be premiered in the beginning of February. [...]

A year ago I was approached by a director here called Rúnar Guðbrandsson who has a theatre group called Lab Loki, which comes from the direction of experimental, challenging physical theatre. He is really I think one of the most interesting theatre directors here. And he called me a year ago just after the crash happened, and commissioned a play. Because I have never written anything directly into a social situation, I thought, okay, maybe this is my chance to do it. I knew instantly that I was taking the chance of failing spectacularly. Maybe I will. I will know in the beginning of February if I have failed spectacularly. I really in a way feel very comfortable to do this in the theatre, because the theatre is a place where you can have a more direct dialogue than you can in poetry or in the novel. You can shout slogans from the stage. It is a platform. It is something close to the meeting, it is close to the live meeting. So it is already one step closer to the place where a discourse really happens in society. It has been quite a challenge. The play is not obviously political. But at the same time no one will be in doubt about where it's coming from.

Do you feel pressure to make your work accessible because of the milieu of the layman writing for a newspaper or people feeling as if the intellectual has to come off his high horse and meet the people half way?

Well, I've been asked to, what I would call, water my work down from the beginning. In a way my generation, I was born in 1962, we have from beginning been perceived as quite elitist and arrogant and unaware of the needs of the layman. But I think that's such a big part of the writer's job – such a big part of the writer's job is to be difficult and is to work with the most complicated tools of language...

The widest yardstick.

...Yes. Come on, everybody else can do that other thing and they are doing it all the time. But I think in Iceland we have a quite long-standing respect for writers and for literature. And I don't think people here would like writers to become populist and to water themselves down. I think they like us to be as artistic and difficult as possible. And they know that they will have to take a step towards us. But of course, every writer wants to have a reader. You never

POETRY REVIEW 'Our Disappearing World'

make your work so complicated that you only have three readers – yourself, your editor and your wife. [...]

Do you think that the best writers still make it to the top of the heap?

Yeah, yeah, and I think there are enough people here who recognize talent, where talent lies. So I've got no problem with that. I really think this democratic way of doing things has helped us discover talent that usually would not or otherwise find its way into the centre of the literary scene here. But what I think is important in Icelandic literature now, what I think is important for Icelandic society, is that we find a way of opening up, to make it easier for those who never before have had a voice in Icelandic literature – and that is the immigrants, that is foreigners that have come to stay here. At the moment the literary scene is absolutely closed to them. There are no places where they can approach the publishing houses. Because you would have to read it in Polish and then you would have to translate it. Are you going to wait for the poor Polish writer to get enough command of Icelandic to start writing? For me it has been obvious for quite some years now that the next big step for literature is when those voices are going to be heard. And I think that's much more important than how Icelandic born and bred writers will respond to this crash. Because this crash is not going to be our September 11th. This is of course a big moral shock. But for people who have really been looking at the society for years this isn't such a shock. [...]

But what about the purity of the language? Icelandic is known for not accepting loan words. What do you think would happen in terms of that? Do you think that the language would go through a renovation as well?

I'm sure that will be. I don't know. I tend to look at this from a distance: this language is going to be changing anyway and I think it would be much more rewarding for the language if it happens in a way where we embrace the changes that the immigrant writers, the possibility immigrant writers, will bring. Then we are actually encouraging someone to actually write about his experience of being here, translating it into words, filtering it through his Thai, or Polish, or whatever his language and experience. That is a dynamic way for the language to change. And the language will change. It's not like it's ever been possible to keep a language pure. The Icelandic written language in the eighteenth century was so full of Danish and German that to read official

POETRY REVIEW 'Our Disappearing World'

letters at the time was really... They really look bad to us today.

Let's just get back to the question of politics for a minute. I'm interested to know what place you see for politics within in poetry; whether you think that poetry can ever be devoid of politics? This is an ongoing question.

I don't think poetry should be devoid of politics. And I think poetry has never really been devoid of politics. Poetry is always so much about the individual's experience. So it has to, it has to, *it has to* deliver the individual's experience of whatever political situation there is. [...]

And your influences..?

In the beginning I was simply influenced by the Icelandic Atom Poets. But when I started looking at where their influences came from it was obvious that they were very much influenced by the Surrealist tradition. So that's where I went as well. And in the Eighties we had this little surrealist group here called Medusa and we were exploring the possibilities of surrealism. But what we did, which the Atom Poets did not, was that we mixed it with a more outgoing agenda. Because we were also influenced by punk. For us, it was the combination of the do-it-yourself attitude of punk, and surrealism. So right from the beginning it was very much about bringing the message out there. So we were reading at the punk concerts. You usually had surrealist poets between bands trying to break down the barriers between the real and the imaginary. Which was quite a challenge for us the poets, because at those gigs nobody was there for the poetry. Absolutely nobody was there for the poetry, nobody came for the surrealist poets, they all came for the music. And then you went on stage and you really had to tough it out for your fifteen minutes. You really had to find a way of delivering it, so they wouldn't just boo you off the stage in the first minute. So for us from the beginning it was a mixture of a social agenda mixed with a really true and strong belief in the revolutionary possibilities of poetry. We really believed that things would change with surrealist poetry. We really believed that creating all those weird little things would have an impact. And I think we did in a way. I think we managed to do quite a lot. I don't think we changed society. But we managed to introduce much more aggressive *avant garde*-ist approach to poetry and the arts.

Do you think there is a collective like that nowadays? Do you think that your

POETRY REVIEW 'Our Disappearing World'

group in any way aligned with music?

For us it was so much also about dialogue and collaboration between art forms. As you probably know, there were two published poets in the Sugarcubes, the bass player and the guitarist, both of them had published two or three books of poetry and were recognized poets, young poets, at the time. So right from the beginning for us it came absolutely easy together and from the beginning we completely rejected the idea of "high art" and "low art." I saw no difference between writing poetry to be published in books and to be read on the stage and let's say Einar Örn, the singer in the Sugarcubes, making his lyrics and bringing them to people through his music. I never thought his was a lesser art. Or he never thought, Oh he is working in the snobbish arts. So from the beginning we saw no barriers and no difference. It was just you and your friends expressing yourself through different means. And I think that was something new here. [...]

How do you compare Icelandic literature with other Scandinavian literatures? How has that relationship changed from the way it was in the past?

As far as I know, I think we are actually doing quite well. I think, for example, the Danes have had an incredibly strong and great poetry scene. For the last twenty years I would say, maybe twenty-five years, since the beginning of the eighties. I actually think the Danes are better poets than Icelanders. I think you see such strong and beautifully made poetry there.

And why do you think that is?

I think they've nurtured their poets very well. I mean in 86/87 they founded this Writer's School there. Do you know this?

No...

It's an incredible little idea... There was a Danish poet and critic called Poul Borum and he was really always looking for the new, new things. And in the late Eighties, he founded this Writer's School. It's a creative writing school but founded by writers and completely built on the writer's experience.

Do they study classical texts?

It's mostly focused on creating new texts. Of course they get some background and they get some literary history but it's mostly about...

POETRY REVIEW 'Our Disappearing World'

There has been a lot of criticism and backlash against some of the writer's workshops in the US and in England: but you think that this worked well?

This has been really working so well in Denmark. It's really been an incredible breeding place for young talent. So I really think they've been nurturing their young poets there. Here in Iceland to be a young poet is really just a struggle. As you know most young poets here begin by self-publishing. That's how we all begin really. You publish your things yourself. And fortunately because of how small the country is you manage, even though you might publish yourself, one or two reviews in the papers. And pretty soon after your first book you might find yourself at a reading where you are reading with more established poets. [...]

[But] I was definitely very aware when I wrote *The Blue Fox* that I was writing a very Nordic book. A book really feeding on the North, on Nordic society and the social values of our society. The common values that the Nordic society has: its stance towards the weak, and the meek and how they are positioned in society, and the possibility of redemption through the position you take towards the meek. [...]

There is something about people like [Octavio] Paz and [Odysseus] Elytis which I admire and envy. And that is the incredibly broad vision they have. They somehow manage to write about the universe and the life of the ladybird in the same poem. And this is something I think is also important for today; poetry should still be the platform in which we can still have this broad vision, which can position man in the big picture, especially now when we have this huge comeback of religion, and religion is again claiming its role as the tool to position man. Then I think poetry should really state its case again as the other great tool we have, the tool that is devoid of dogma, the tool that is the humanist way of positioning man. [...]

Clearly people, writers, have been moving away from the country, maybe what you would call the native realm, and moving to the cities. Could you see a person like Halldór Laxness flowering today? He was more in touch I think with the land than a lot of writers today are. Maybe that's wrong.

Let's say the fairy tale that was Halldór Laxness will not repeat itself in the way it happened then, because the incredible thing about Halldór Laxness is his literature. He is actually born in Reykjavik. So this is a man who is born in a town of ten thousand people. And he manages to find a way of holding

POETRY REVIEW 'Our Disappearing World'

the medal of the Nobel Prize in his hand one day. And for me that is an example of how literature should work. I am sure there is a town of ten thousand people in Benin today. It's just possible that a Nobel Prize winner is taking his first steps there now. That is the magical thing about literature: that it belongs to everyone. Storytelling belongs to everyone. Poetry belongs to everyone.

So that particular story will not repeat itself. But I think we still have the situation here where writers, even though they are born and bred in Reykjavik – as I am you know – have contact with the country and the past. On the other hand, it is a question of whether the country has anything to tell us – and we should be challenging and channelling that. I'm not sure, but I think this democratic thing that I was talking about earlier – how we welcome new writers – is really the key to how Icelandic literature can renew itself and why I think it keeps being interesting.

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Sjón
(from the book of illusions)

reykjavík 11.03.'80

dear f.

last night I dreamed you cut
all your hair off and used it to make a bed in which we
made love, on the facing wall was a mirror
and when I came I saw in
it that you were no longer with me.
you sat in a chair lacquering your fingernails
with green nail polish made out of grasshoppers.
you said: red houses are your wives.
then I woke up because I had bit myself in the
shoulder. it was half past six.

otherwise everything is fine, it is
cold here but warm enough for an old
tiger.

bye, your friend

sigurjón

Translated by David McDuff

Kári Tulinius
ATLANTSHAFSEKKUR

éghefaðeinsþekkt
hanasemholunasem
samræðurbeygjast
kringumísamk mum
fjölskylduminnar
bringufiðurreitt
burtaffjölskyldu
flagbarðiðhrundi
moldarkóþpyrlast
þaðhefurekkisest
ennenmunjáþaðmun
einminningumhana
stjarnaísvarthol
hverfurogmunekki
sleppaójáóekkijá
sjálfsm●rðerhvað

Atlantic Ocean Sinks

I have only known her as the hole that conversation curves around
in family gatherings

Breast-feathers plucked off a family

The eroded hill collapsed a dust cloud swirls it hasn't settled yet
but it will yes it will

One memory of her

A star disappears into a black hole and will not escape oh yes oh
yeah right

Suicide is what

Translated by the author. Kári Tulinius lives in Providence, Rhode Island. His first novel, *Píslarvottar án hæfileika* (*Martyrs Without Talent*), will be published by Forlagið in May.

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Elías Knörr

Two housewives dance on a clothesline
and make love with funambulism
One is a cotton flower
and the other is a silky butterfly
Under the influence of the cleaning
they write poems on the laundry

*

Blooddrops wake up early in the mirror
many injured eyes appear at home

But let us do flowers out of the morning

The truth is
a satirically composed space
it may be decorated with fertility and stars
it may be healed
with glowing flowers

One morning
the girl wakes up in a labyrinth
and bleeds herself blind
She has her home in the mirror pictures

But let us make silence out of the morning
let us dress the echo in a straitjacket

Translated by the author. Elías Knörr is a young poet. Born into a family of sailors, he's probably the first man in his family never to go to sea. Instead, he decided to study (Icelandic and Italian) philology and move abroad. His first collection, *The Fisherman with the Morning Horses Under the Dress*, appears shortly.