

Searching for Herself: Female Experience and Female Tradition in Icelandic Literature

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“I AM A WOMAN”

“When I made the decision to become a writer — that is, with publishing in mind — I reckoned squarely with the fact that I am a woman,” wrote Svava Jakobsdóttir in a 1979 essay on women’s poetics entitled “Experience and Reality: Some Reflections of a Woman Writer.” “That is, I was painfully aware that I lacked the experiences in life that seemed to be the fabric of literature. Sometimes I felt that I had not experienced anything that was suitable for fiction.” At the same time she was equally convinced that, to achieve even the minimum results in creating art, she would have to observe the fundamental responsibility of being true to herself and her own experience. She would have to write about what she knew. She places this problem in a cultural context, showing that what is at issue is a difficulty, not just for her, but for all women writers:

Female experience is, for the most part, concealed beneath the surface of our culture. Any woman who begins to write, and with the intention of trying to heed her responsibility as an author to be faithful to her own experience and adhere to the truth, quickly discovers a wide gap between her world of experience — which is hidden and, above all, closed — and the dominant, official culture. If she searches for herself and her experience in the prevailing literary tradition, she soon realizes that only one-tenth of this experience is visible; the other nine-tenths are hidden. (“Reynsla og raunveruleiki,” 226–27)

The role of the woman writer is to give this nine-tenths a language or, as Svava Jakobsdóttir puts it, “to bring these undercurrents to the surface” (“Reynsla og raunveruleiki,” 227). This presents various difficulties, but for

the woman writer there are two in particular: on the one hand, her social position as a woman and, on the other, her position within the literary establishment and the dominant literary tradition.

Men have shaped the dominant literary tradition and controlled the literary establishment of each era, as seen in both the subject and style of the official canon. Here only a few women are visible, and those who do appear are merely stereotypes unsupported by the actual experiences of women. When women writers aim to depict women and their lives, they encounter this tradition, which they cannot build upon. Some try to adapt to the tradition, others break new ground. Speaking of the position of women writers in this regard, Svava Jakobsdóttir uses the metaphor of a woman who ventures out on the street after dark: “The street of literary tradition that she walks along is well trodden and paved by men. A woman writer always runs a risk of being seduced with elegant symbols and beautiful metaphors which originate in a perspective toward the subject that is totally different from hers, and which lead to a perspective that the woman writer, in the end, has only appropriated for herself but not experienced. Thus the female experience has not been conveyed” (224). To be able to write, women must break away from the tradition and rework both subject and language in a way different from what is instilled by this tradition.

“SHE HAD A DESK, IN FACT”

A notable aspect of Icelandic literary history is how few women writers there are. Of all the practicing Icelandic writers in the year 1984, only one in five was a woman, and in previous years there were proportionally fewer (Kress, “Listsköpun kvenna,” 194–96).

Icelandic literary history is filled with the “silences” of women writers. Twenty-six years elapsed between the first two books of poems of Sigríður Einar, nineteen years between the books of poems of Halldóra B. Björns-son, and a similar period between the most recent books of poems of Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir. Also typical for women is how late in life they begin to write, to tackle substantive material. Jakobína Sigurðardóttir saw the publication of her first novel when she was over forty years old, and the same is true of her sister, Fríða Sigurðardóttir. Ragnheiður Jónsdóttir was in her late forties when she published her first novel, Guðrún Árnadóttir of Lundur began to write in her fifties, and Málfríður Einaradóttir was almost eighty when her first book was published.

Some women have tried to write at night; others use every free moment. An article in a 1924 issue of the women’s periodical *19. júní* recounts a visit

to the farmstead of the writer Kristín Sigfúsdóttir and describes her writing facilities:

Next to the sitting room was her kitchen. There stood a table with writing materials. We asked in fun whether this was her desk, and she told us that she had no time for writing except at night, but that, whenever she was working around the house and something good occurred to her, she would jot it down as a reminder, and that was why she kept her writing materials handy. Back in the sitting room was a little bookshelf; here were several works in various Scandinavian languages and other classics. The only thing Kristín complained about was how much trouble she had getting books and how little time she had for reading, for books were her passion; that was obvious. (Sigurðardóttir, “Kristín Sigfúsdóttir,” 73–74)

The work habits of Unnur Benediktsdóttir Bjarklind, who wrote under the penname Hulda, are described by her son in this way: “She had a desk, in fact, although I hardly ever remember seeing her sitting at it. But I remember many a morning when I awoke to see her sitting up in bed writing. She went to bed very early but got up at the crack of dawn, when she would eagerly take up her pen and devote all her energy to writing—before the long workday of the housewife began” (Bjarklind, “Ljósklædd birtist hún mér,” 153).

Other women have been able to shut themselves off from their surroundings, not allowing disturbances to bother them. In an interview on her eightieth birthday Elínborg Lárusdóttir said: “What helped me most was that I got used to writing even when I didn’t have the peace and quiet for it. I concentrated on the writing and didn’t hear what was going on around me. If I hadn’t managed to do so, I would never have written anything” (Lárusdóttir, “Dag skal að kveldi lofa,” 834). And Ása Sólveig, who is half a century younger, made a similar comment when asked whether she needed privacy to be able to think and write: “You see, then I would never have written a word. . . . I’ve trained myself to work in noise” (Ása Sólveig, “Ég hefði aldrei skrifað orð,” 36).

“THE TASK WAS MINE”

The writings of Icelandic women contain many statements that show a keen awareness of their situation. In a handwritten bulletin from 1913, circulated among the members of the Women’s Reading Club of Reykjavík, Theodora Thoroddsen (1863–1954) wrote: “The way it is with poetic talent, as with

most other intellectual abilities, is that we women are generally second fiddle to men. It shall be left here unsaid whether the cause of this is that our brain is lighter on the scales than theirs, as claimed by some, or whether it is rooted in the intellectual and physical oppression of many centuries” (Thoroddsen, *Ritsafn*, 111). Theodora Thoroddsen, who had thirteen children and many mouths to feed, never fully achieved her potential as a writer. She often mentions this, and not always without anguish, in the few but fine works that she produced. Her well-known poem “Mitt var starfið” (The task was mine) from *Ritsafn* (1960; Collected writings) begins this way: “In this world the task was mine / on days both hot and cold / to wipe kids’ bottoms and comb their hair / and toil to darn the holes.” The poem’s five verses all end on the word *staga* (darn), which the poet underlined in the manuscript. Like so many women writers of her generation, she tries to pin her hopes on another world, but even there she is accompanied by her darning: “If Death should come with her paring knife / and cut short my days as they unfold / I think it will prove to be my lot / in Hell to darn more holes” (*Ritsafn*, 123–24). In his introduction to Theodora Thoroddsen’s collected works, the influential literary scholar Sigurður Nordal calls these verses “words of impatience” and concludes that they were “composed on behalf of many mothers” (“Theodora Thoroddsen,” 28).

A poem in Halldóra B. Björnsson’s (1907–68) collection *Við sanda* (1968; At sands) is reminiscent of Theodora Thoroddsen’s verses. Entitled “Og þá rigndi blómum” (And then it rained flowers), it is written in the words of a deceased poet who is honored with flowers for her casket but who was never nurtured during her lifetime and given the chance to realize her potential. She accepts her death but feels that “the greatest ill is how often I was dead / while I subsisted.” Her few poems either were lost or “ended up with trolls,” and her time was spent “in the baking and churning chores / for an urgent question / was on everyone’s lips: / Don’t you have any coffee / or bread — or some mended socks in the drawer?” Now that she is dead, people have begun to search for these few poems of hers: “Every scrap of paper is devoured, / but mention has been suspended / of those countless cooking days / and the overwhelming multitude / of rags I have mended” (*Við sanda*, 76–77).

In the poem “Heimsókn gyðjunnar” (The muse’s visit) from *Kvæði* (1960; Poems), Jakobína Sigurðardóttir (1918–94) describes a similar conflict. The muse visits the poet as she is washing the cellar steps. Before she has time to attend to the muse, she must finish the task, and then she has to boil the fish and set the table. These obligations are described in everyday language and with an urgent rhythm: “Now, out goes the dirty water from

the pail in a hurry! / Then I fling the plates on the table fast.” But there is still more to do; the chores are endless, and the poet has to dismiss the muse: “Indeed, Muse, you give me a look of reproach, / but awaiting me now is the laundry. / I send you my thoughts, though I turned my back / when you kindly sought my company” (*Kvæði*, 70, 72).

“HANDICRAFT RATHER THAN LITERATURE”

“Housecleaning, laundry, factory work, / would that be the stuff of poetry?” (*Kvæði*, 23), asked Jakobína Sigurðardóttir at the beginning of her writing career in the poem “Náttmál” (Bedtime). The question is the same as the one that Svava Jakobsdóttir asked herself when she began to write, feeling that she had not experienced anything that would be appropriate for fiction. The question is answered negatively by the literary establishment: female experience is not the stuff of literature.

The attitude of the literary establishment toward women’s literature is manifested in various ways. But, generally, there has been a tacit agreement in all discussions of Icelandic literature and literary history to bypass literary works by women as if they did not exist. Until quite recently it was an exception whenever literature by women was mentioned in literary histories. In her pioneering work on early women poets Guðrún P. Helgadóttir asserts that, over the ages, considerably more women’s poetry has been lost than men’s. There is little account of women’s poetry in manuscripts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and women are not mentioned in rosters of authors. Sometimes, their names are written in the margins, and in one entry the scribe apologized for counting women among the poets (Helgadóttir, *Skáldkonur fyrri alda*, 2:16). Nor is their lot much better in the twentieth century. For example, the literary survey *Nordens litteratur* (1972), which covers Scandinavian literature from its inception until approximately 1960 (the most recent book discussed in the survey was published in 1970), a total of 101 Icelandic authors are mentioned. Of these, one is a woman.

Poetry written by women has not been taken seriously, as clearly seen in the reviews and various comments about works by women, and seldom has work by women been discussed without reference to the sex of the author. If women writers are included in literary histories, they are most often treated as a group—discussed as women and relegated to a section at the very end. Furthermore, critics often have difficulty distinguishing between the woman and the work being discussed. Adjectives such as *little*, *pretty*, *tasteful*, *neat*, and *feminine* characterize many of these reviews. Terms like

long-winded, *common*, and *ordinary* are also much used. In his history of Icelandic fiction during the period 1940–70 Erlendur Jónsson has this to say about the works of Jakobína Sigurðardóttir: “Her best stories are stories about ordinary people in ordinary circumstances. Their problems are also ordinary. Consistent with such subjects, the stories are told in an ordinary way” (*Íslensk skáldsagnaritun*, 166). Some critics are fond of jesting about women’s literature, comparing it to handicraft. A 1953 reviewer in the literary magazine *Helgafell* offered this evaluation of the novel *Í biðsal hjónabandsins* (1949; In the waiting room of matrimony) by Þórunn Elfa Magnúsdóttir: “The author takes great pleasure in describing landscape and households, domestic practices, and all sorts of trivial pursuits, and does it fairly well, but she carries this to extremes so that it becomes tedious. What also emerges here is a great interest in needlework and handicraft of various kinds, and, in fact, the book must be regarded more as handicraft rather than literature” (Crassus, “Nokkrar nýjar bækur,” 114).

Another prevalent attitude is that the creativity of women is not at all conscious but, rather, unintentional. Speaking of the poets and twin sisters Herdís Andrésdóttir and Ólína Andrésdóttir, Sigurður Nordal writes in a 1925 issue of the journal *Iðunn*: “The sisters have composed poetry along with their daily chores, as the bird sings, without realizing that they were creating works of art” (“Ritsjá,” 73). Such an attitude toward the literature of women has an inevitable influence on women writers, many of whom begin to doubt their abilities and what they are writing. Hulda called the drawer where she kept drafts of her poems her “drivel drawer” (*Úr minningablöðum*, 106), and for Ólöf Sigurðardóttir of Hlaðir the finished manuscripts of her poems were “stuff” (Kress, “Um konur og bókmenntir,” 17). There are many instances of women burning their manuscripts without showing them to anyone.

THE ORIGINS OF ICELANDIC WOMEN’S LITERATURE

Icelandic women writers belong to an ancient and rich oral literary tradition rooted in Old Norse culture. The oral tradition in poetry can be traced to women’s culture, particularly to such activities as healing and prophesying. The poetic genres were mainly visions (*spár*) and incantations (*seiðr*) as well as laments, dreams, work songs, and poems of healing.

The greatest part of Old Icelandic literature is anonymous, and any named authors are almost exclusively men. No prose work is attributed to a woman, and of the surviving 250 poems by known authors only a few are attributed to women. The author of *Jóns saga helga* (The life of Saint Jón of

Hólar) describes the scholastic life at the bishopric of Hólar in the twelfth century and mentions, in particular, that one woman is among the pupils. Although she is apparently not being taught to read or write, she is said to be competent “in book arts” (*Jóns saga helga*, 43), which she teaches to the other pupils while she embroiders.

The most important remnants of the Old Icelandic oral tradition are the Eddic poems (see chapter 1). *Edda* means “great-grandmother” and may be etymologically related to *óðr*, or “ode” (see also p. 153). This loose collection of poetry, composed before the eleventh century and preserved in a manuscript dating from ca. 1270, has come down to us in more or less distorted forms through many channels of the written male culture. Many of the Eddic poems are characterized by a woman’s point of view and such female experiences as giving birth, embroidering, and doing laundry. They describe feelings of love, betrayal, mourning, and abandonment. Some are women’s monologues, whereas others are dialogues between women. In “Sigrdrífumál” (The lay of Sigrdrífa) a woman is teaching a man healing verses. “Guðrúnarkviða forna” (The old lay of Guðrún) is about a woman who is trying to cry over her husband’s corpse. “Oddrúnargrátr” (Oddrún’s lament) is a dialogue between a woman in labor and a midwife who shares her own sorrows. In “Grottasöngur” (The song of Grotti) two slave women are singing as they work at an enormous millstone called Grotti, grinding out death and destruction to their oppressors. “Skírnismál” (The lay of Skirni) is a poem about male desire and sexual violence toward a beautiful giantess. “Völuspá” (The sibyl’s prophecy), the most celebrated poem of Old Icelandic literature, has traditionally been interpreted as a poem about the apocalypse of the pagan culture—or the end of the world in general. However, the powerful image of the sibyl sinking into the earth, after relinquishing all her knowledge to Odin, symbolizes a more specific apocalypse: that of women’s culture (see also Kress, “The Apocalypse of a Culture,” and “Hvad en kvinde kvæder”).

A similar story of appropriation can be seen in the myth in which Odin steals the mead of poetic inspiration from the giantess Gunnlöð by tricking her. The story appears in Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda*, known in English as the *Prose Edda* (ca. 1240), a textbook of poetics compiled to encourage young men to learn the metaphors of the ancient oral tradition for use in their courtly verses (see p. 151). This work culminated a process, beginning with the coming of Christianity and then literacy, by which poetry was taken out of the realm of women’s culture and transferred to what became the first Icelandic literary establishment: the schools; the scribes; and the monasteries. At the same time the thirteenth century marks the rise of the Icelan-

dic sagas, an anonymous but overtly masculine genre emphasizing feuds and battles based on old tales and chronicles. Of special interest is the famous *Laxdæla saga* (The saga of the Laxdælir) because of its female antagonist and its emphasis on women's activities. A curious female perspective runs through the entire story, frequently suppressed by the genre's demand for masculine adventures and exploits (see also Kress, "You Will Find It All Rather Monotonous"). The same kind of structure, although not quite so obvious, can be seen in several other sagas, such as *Gunnlaugs saga* (The saga of Gunnlaugr), *Eiríks saga rauða* (The saga of Eirik the Red), *Svarfdæla saga* (The saga of the Svarfdælir), and *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* (The saga of Bárðr), all of which attempt to put a woman in the role of the main character.

Laxdæla saga contains the symbolic narrative of the Irish princess and slave Melkorka, who rebels against her enslavement by pretending to be mute. One day Melkorka's master, hearing voices, discovers his son with his mother: "He realized then that she was not speechless at all, for she was talking busily to the child" (*Laxdæla saga*, trans. Magnusson and Pálsson, 68). This image of the mother secretly breaking her silence in order to pass on to her son the knowledge of her native language has been interpreted as an illustration of women's great cultural influence. Because women held a strong position in the native oral tradition, a tradition that they passed on to their learned sons, the literature was written in the vernacular rather than in Latin, the official language elsewhere in Europe (Kellogg, "Sex and the Vernacular in Medieval Iceland").

ANONYMOUS LITERATURE: BALLADS AND FOLKTALES

For centuries women's literature survived in oral form alongside the dominant and learned canon of men. These genres were the more flexible ones: ballads; lyrics; quatrains; folk songs; and folktales. When women attempted a genre with strict metrical rules, they tended to parody it. Ballads (see also pp. 60–63) in particular were recited and preserved by women. Conversely, those who collected the poems and wrote them down were almost always men (Ólason, "Inngangur," 82). Ballads were sung, and it has been pointed out that the melodies stem directly from the realm of women's work, capturing the rhythms of, say, rocking a child or spinning (Eliásson, "Eru sagnadansar kvennatónlist?"). The ballads are mainly concerned with women's lives, and women play a major role in these stories. Common themes are violence against women, forbidden love, rape and incest, and concealed childbirth and infanticide as well as women's solidarity and friendship, their

concern for their children, and their revenge against evildoers. In “Margrétar kvæði” (The ballad of Margaret) Margrét is first raped and impregnated by her brother, then burned alive, as punishment, by her father, the king. “Tófu kvæði” (The ballad of Tófa) describes the internal conflict of a young woman who must decide whether the child she has delivered in secret will live or die: “She dared not nurture / because of her brothers. / She dared not dispatch in front of her god” (*Íslensk fornkvæði*, 80). In “Ebbadætra kvæði” (The ballad of Ebba’s daughters) women avenge themselves on their rapists by beheading them. Other ballads belittle men by making fun of them. “Skeggkarls kvæði” (The ballad of Beard-man) is about a man with such a great long beard that five men are needed to carry it. When the man wants to kiss the girls, the beard gets in the way; when he tries to walk, he trips over it.

The church strongly opposed ballads and managed to suppress them. To counteract their influence Guðbrandur Þorláksson, the bishop at Hólar, supervised the publication of *Vísnaþók* (1612; Book of verses) and commissioned recognized poets to compose secular poetry for the book (see also p. 180). No woman was among them, but the most beautiful and enduring poems in the book imitate the ballads and make use of their free meter.

One of Iceland’s oldest fairy tales in manuscript, *Brjáms saga* (The tale of Brjám), was recorded about 1700 from a woman’s narrative, and over the centuries women have played a major role in the creation and preservation of folk- and fairy tales. Guðbrandur Vigfússon (preface, xxxviii) has observed that, although women have not written as many books as men, they are primarily responsible for the preservation of folktales and folk poems. Either the stories were told to scribes by women, or they were passed on by other storytellers who had heard them in childhood from their mothers or other women. A great many folktales are about women’s lives and experiences, such as secret love, backbreaking labor, forced marriages, and childbirth. In particular fairy tales and outlaw stories depicting the utopian life outside society can be traced to women. Several ghost stories have also been recorded from women’s narratives, including the best known of all, “Djákninn á Myrká” (The deacon at Myrká). This is the story of a dead man who comes to a farmhouse to take his sweetheart to a dance, although, in fact, he intends to take her with him into the grave. The description of their moonlit journey on horseback over the frozen landscape is poetic yet filled with horror. The young woman gradually realizes where the journey will end and manages to save herself at the last minute by grabbing the bellpull at the graveyard gate. The deacon plunges into the grave, and the woman goes mad, for now she can no more return to society than he can. Another

famous but brief story, “Móðir mín í kví, kví” (Mother mine in the sheepfold, sheepfold), tells of an unwed mother who has given birth to her child in secret and then put it out to die of exposure. The story makes it clear that she would otherwise have faced severe punishment and even death. The dead child comes back to haunt her, following her to the sheepfold where she is milking and feeling sorry for herself because she has no fine clothes to wear to an upcoming dance. The child recites a rhyme, offering the mother its swaddling cloth as a dance frock. The shock drives the woman mad.

“EVEN THOUGH THE SWAN SINGS BETTER”

Rímur (metrical romances; lit. “rhymes”) are epic poems with fixed forms and complicated meters, their narratives drawing on accounts of heroic feats found in ancient tales (see also previous chapters). *Rímur* formed the dominant genre in Icelandic literature from the sixteenth century until well into the nineteenth. Unlike ballads, *rímur* constitute a male genre in which authors are identified by name and women are largely tangential.

Legend has it that Rannveig, the daughter of the sixteenth-century poet Þórður of Strjúgur, composed a section of her father’s *Rollantsrímur* (The *rímur* of Rollant) while stirring a pot of porridge. When her father had finished the first part of the poem, he became ill and took to his bed. His daughter, thinking that he was going to die, took up the poem where he had left off and added to it. The father recovered, however, and, when he discovered what she had done and realized that her verses were better than his, he became so angry that he slapped her (Þorkelsson, *Om Digtningen på Island*, 343).

One of the few women among the numerous poets of this genre was Steinunn Finnsdóttir (1641–1710), the first Icelandic woman whose poetry has survived in some quantity. She freed up the genre’s strict form by connecting it with the folk poetry and rhymes of oral tradition. The subjects of her metrical romances are drawn from fairy tales and Icelandic ballads, which makes them unique among the metrical romances. Whereas the male poets address an audience primarily made up of women and, thus, write so-called love songs (*mansöngvar*, sg. *mansöngur*; see pp. 57, 182) to them, Steinunn Finnsdóttir addresses either young girls or children. At many points in her metrical romances she apologizes for her poetry. In *Snækóngrímur* (The *rímur* of the Snow King) she compares herself to the ptarmigan, which conceals itself in eiderdown but keeps up its spirits even though the swan sings better. The voices of both are God given but different, and she expresses her thanks “for the little / that is lent to me.” She

makes frequent use of conditional clauses, which came to typify the discourse of Icelandic women poets. In *Hyndlurímur* (The *rímur* of Hyndla) she blesses those who do not condemn her poetry even though it is not praiseworthy, and she ends by asking the “good” poets to correct what she has composed (Finnsdóttir, *Hyndlu rímur og Snækóns rímur*, 97, 34).

Steinunn Finnsdóttir also composed *vikivakar* (sg. *vikivaki*), a particular kind of ballad with lyric refrains (see also pp. 224–25). In “Kappakvæði” (Poem of champions) she writes about the male heroes of the Icelandic sagas. The refrain is provocative and ambiguous, drawn from traditional *vikivaki*: “They want an audience with me” (Finnsdóttir, *Hyndlu rímur og Snækóns rímur*, 115). The heroes depend on her to write poems about them, and they all want their chance. Thus, she is often playful in her poetry. She makes fun of the masculine tradition and inverts its heroic discourse by placing events in ordinary surroundings.

Another dominant genre in Icelandic literature at this time was the hymn, which, unlike the *rímur*, was an officially recognized form of poetry. Significantly, no woman was among Iceland’s best-known hymnists. Yet the first work to appear in print by an Icelandic woman was a hymn, “Daglegt andvarp guðhræddar sálar” (The daily sigh of a god-fearing soul). Composed by Guðný Guðmundsdóttir (b. 1660) and printed in a 1772 hymnal at Hólar, the hymn makes use of physical, almost erotic imagery in describing a yearning for the embrace of Jesus, who is depicted as the ideal lover. In other hymns by women God in heaven becomes the ideal father, unlike the cruel fathers on earth.

The first book published by an Icelandic woman is the cookbook *Einfalt matreiðsluvasakver fyrir heldri manna húsfreyjur* (A simple pocket pamphlet of cookery for gentlemen’s housewives), which was printed in 1800. Although Marta Stephensen is listed on the title page as the author, the book has commonly been attributed to her brother-in-law, Magnús Stephensen, one of the major exponents of the Enlightenment in Iceland. In the introduction Marta’s husband says that “for understandable reasons” he has had to correct this and that for his wife before the pages were sent to the printer. Yet the cooking instructions reveal that only a woman could have compiled the book, whether she wrote it herself or dictated it.

POEMS IN MANUSCRIPT

Until the eighteenth century specific women poets are mentioned only sporadically in literary sources, and the few surviving poems by women are fragmentary. Their main mode of expression was the quatrain (*lausavísa*), a

four-line metrical fragment from everyday life that describes personal experiences, daily events, and reflections on nature (see also pp. 27, 42, 178).

During the nineteenth century poems were circulated in manuscript, and some of these manuscripts contained poems by women. A section of one such manuscript, archived in the National Library of Iceland, bears the heading “Kvennaljóðmáli” (Women’s poetry; collected by Páll Pálsson, Lbs 167 4to) and contains poems written exclusively by women, so the concept was not unknown during that period. This manuscript includes poems by eighteen women poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The works of some of these poets, such as Látra-Björg and Vatnsenda-Rósa, were later published.

The legendary Látra-Björg (Björg Einarsdóttir; 1716–84) lived in the country’s most remote settlement in the northern fjords. She was unmarried, fished the open sea, did other kinds of men’s work, and was considered odd and unfeminine. She dissolved her household, became a drifter, and died a beggar. Some of her poetry has survived. She avoids convention, writing neither hymns nor *rímur* but, rather, occasional verses about her surroundings and the present moment. She writes about nature and the weather, the horizon, and place-names of reefs and cliffs. In her poems she often situates herself at the boundary between land and sea, on the beach or up in the surrounding mountains and cliffs. She is fascinated by the surf that pounds the shore, and her descriptions abound in vivid imagery and onomatopoeia: “Breakers roar over boulders / Steeds of the surf smash, / bluffs tremble on the brink / many stones wail.” One of Látra-Björg’s best-known poems is “Fagurt er í Fjörðum” (“Tis fair in the fjords), in which her native district becomes a metaphor for the whole world. Here, life is good when the weather is fair and there is enough to eat, but in the harsh winter there can be no worse district: “People and animals then die” (Helgadóttir, *Skáldkonur fyrri alda*, 2:65, 76). Some of her verses are very grotesque. She lampoons her neighbors, especially men, and in this respect shares the female tradition.

Vatnsenda-Rósa (Rósa Guðmundsdóttir; 1795–1855) also became a legend, but, unlike the masculine Látra-Björg, she is known in literary history as a femme fatale, with many scandalous love affairs to her credit. Very little of her poetry has survived — only two epistolary poems and some quatrains. She is one of the few Icelandic women poets who wrote love poems, some of which quickly became classics: “Your eye and my eye, / oh lovely orbs that gleam / mine is yours, and yours is mine, / you know what I mean.” Most of her lyrics stem from abandonment and are less concerned with love per se than with grief and longing, disappointment and betrayal.

The vanished lover is put on a pedestal and compared with other men, who never measure up. He is a dream vision and exists only in the distance: “It was long ago that I saw him / truly handsome and proud. / A man graced by all gifts, / he stood out from the crowd” (Helgadóttir, *Skáldkonur fyrri alda*, 155). In this personal poetry of pathos are glimpses of the emerging romantic movement in Icelandic literature.

THE SISTER OF ROMANTICISM

“Grasaferð” (Moss gathering) by Jónas Hallgrímsson, which was published in the journal *Fjölur* (1846) and is considered the first modern-day Icelandic short story (see p. 293), contains a notable section on women and poetry. The young narrator, who is a poet despite his age, and his cousin, whom he calls his “sister,” begin to discuss poetry and translations while they are out gathering moss. The girl is as knowledgeable about these subjects as he is, if not more so, and a translation of a Schiller poem is attributed to her in the story. She has been hiding her poetry, but the narrator discovers one of her poems on the wrapper of some prunes that she has given him. Having been found out, she blushes with shame and anger and asks him not to show anyone: “I wouldn’t want it to get around that I’m engaged in this sort of thing, for it has never been regarded as becoming to womenfolk.” He tells her not to worry and then becomes so chivalrous that he offers to take whatever she writes off her hands. But she sees no need for this: “I write hardly enough for my poetry to cause us problems” (“Grasaferð,” 20). The girl’s statement about the inappropriateness of women writing poetry has become proverbial in Icelandic literary history and has also made an impression on Icelandic women poets, who have taken this conversation literally instead of recognizing that Jónas Hallgrímsson was criticizing society for this opinion (see also Kress, “‘Sáúð þið hana systur mína?’”).

It is interesting to compare the girl in “Grasaferð” with an actual woman poet who lived during the same period. Guðný Jónsdóttir of Klömbur (1804–36) was born in the same district as Jónas Hallgrímsson and was also close to his age. Yet their lives were very different. She married a man with a seminary education and bore four children, who either died or were taken away from her. Her husband left her, reportedly because she was more intelligent and articulate than he was. She went to live with her sister in a place she never liked and died there in her early thirties, supposedly of grief. In 1837, the year after her death, *Fjölur* printed one of her best-known poems, “Endurminningin er svo glögg” (The memory is so vivid), along

with her obituary. This is the first secular poem by an Icelandic woman to appear in print. Although the story of Guðný Jónsdóttir's life made a lasting impression on Icelanders, her poems were not published until 1951: as *Guðnýjarkver* (Guðný's chapbook).

The subjects of Guðný Jónsdóttir's poems are drawn from her own life and its painful experiences. Most of them are laments over her separation from her husband and children. "Á heimleið" (Returning home) was composed after Guðný Jónsdóttir had to take her daughter, only several months old, to another farm to place the infant in foster care:

'Tis dark from dread,
the girl-child fair
they took from me.
The world is bare,
the cosmos empty,
many a backward look.
But I must not forget,
the son at home
who gives me joy.
The eye weeps quietly,
there is a balm for every pain
if only it could be found.

She weeps the poem forth, trying to come to terms with her grief, but to no avail. In her last poem, "Saknaðarstef" (Lament), she writes about the separation from her husband: "I sit and mourn the missing / the friend I yearn for sorely." Her sorrow is so great that it overshadows everything else: "I bitterly wept and bid you good-bye, / I will grieve for you until I die" (*Guðnýjarkver*, 91, 103-4). Abandoned, she reacts to the experience as banishment and sees no way out except death.

"A LITTLE MAID GREETES HER COMPATRIOTS"

The first literary work published by an Icelandic woman is a book of poems, *Stúlka* (1876; A lass), by Júlíana Jónsdóttir (1838-1917), who worked as a maid in western Iceland. Júlíana Jónsdóttir was born into the male tradition of romanticism in Icelandic literature, and her poetry shows that she was very fascinated by the poets who formed its literary canon and the tradition that they represented. She cites them in her poems and even sets up a dialogue with them. The consciousness of gender reflected in the very title of her book is immediately striking. With the name *Stúlka* she is apparently

referring to the title of Jón Thoroddsen's famous novel *Piltur og stúlka* (1850; English trans.: *Lad and Lass* [1890]), which is regarded as the first Icelandic novel (see pp. 294–95). Júlíana Jónsdóttir's *stúlka* is independent and alone, a lass without a lad. The title can also be seen as a response to *Snót* (Maiden), the title of a popular anthology of Icelandic poems that was published in 1850 and then reprinted in 1865. *Snót* is a poetic word for “girl,” an idealized term for the more ordinary *stúlka*, which not only refers to a girl but connotes a working girl as well. This ironic and teasing mode of expression is a distinctive characteristic in many of her poems and is especially obvious when she deals with gender and the traditional metaphors for men and women. It should be noted that Júlíana Jónsdóttir's emphasis on gender is manifested not only in her poetry but also in her play *Víg Kjartans Ólafssonar* (The slaying of Kjartan Ólafsson), based on the ill-fated love affair of Kjartan and Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir in *Laxdæla saga*. Despite its title, the tragedy is first and foremost about Guðrún's psychological torments, conveyed for the most part through the character's monologue. Performed at Stykkishólmur in 1879, it is Iceland's oldest extant play by a woman and the first Icelandic historical play as well (see Kress, “Sökum þess ég er kona”).

Júlíana Jónsdóttir's epigraph for *Stúlka* is a short poem that establishes a significant analogy: “A little maid greets / her compatriots, / young and unlearned / but not shy, / seeking hospitality / of good men, / a fatherless child / of a poor mother” (*Stúlka*, ii). The poem can be read simply as an autobiographical description, Júlíana Jónsdóttir being the child of a single mother who was poor. But it can also be seen as a personification of the book itself, parallel to the “lass” in the title — that is, the book is the daughter of a single mother, the woman poet with no tradition behind her.

In many of her poems Júlíana Jónsdóttir writes about women, especially their laborious lives and powerlessness, and often connects these subjects with metaphors of imprisonment. In one of her best poems, “Við dúnhreinsun” (Cleaning eiderdown), from *Stúlka*, she sees herself as literally imprisoned: “It is dark in the prison / of down and haze.” From this confined space she expresses “the laments / of a silent mind” (*Stúlka*, 10–11). The protest in her poems is most fully expressed in her use of grotesque imagery, with which she often succeeds in deconstructing masculinity as well as masculine discourse. Thus, some of her poems are inversions of traditional love poems. Her “love poems” are from the perspective of the lover, who is a feeble old man chasing young women and promising them all kinds of gifts, but the sole outcome is that they laugh at him.

The very first word in this first book of poetry by an Icelandic woman is

little. This metaphor of littleness is very common in Júlíana Jónsdóttir's poetry, expressing a feeling of both cultural and social inferiority. In her greeting the little maid is almost humbly asking for a kind response from the literary establishment. But, in fact, she received none. The book went completely unnoticed and has also been totally ignored in literary histories, as has the name of the poet. Júlíana Jónsdóttir emigrated to America, and she never came back. One year prior to her death she published her second book of poems, *Hagalagðar* (1916; Fleece sheddings), in which she is disillusioned and has given up the search for originality.

Júlíana Jónsdóttir was quite literally seeking a place when she left Iceland. Unlike the male poets of romanticism, who all longed to return home to Iceland, she wanted to get away and, for a poet of the period, wrote surprisingly few patriotic poems. Her poem "Ísland" (Iceland), in *Stúlka*, even goes so far as to parody Bjarni Thorarensen's "Íslands minni" (To Iceland), which was Iceland's national anthem for many years (see p. 262). With this poem Bjarni Thorarensen created the metaphor of the Fjallkona (lit. "Mountain Woman"), a personification of the country. The poem is a hymn to this woman from her Icelandic sons, who are in Denmark longing to return to her: "Ancient motherland of ice / beloved nurturing soil, / mountain woman so fair" (Thorarensen, *Ljóðmáli*, 27). Júlíana Jónsdóttir turns her poem into a parody and a protest: "Ancient motherland of ice, / infertile is your soil, / wind-blown and barren" (*Stúlka*, 8).

The emphasis on gender, which runs through the whole book, is interesting in the context of Icelandic romanticism in that the identity of its male poets was strongly connected with nationalism. Júlíana Jónsdóttir's identity, however, concerns gender. Júlíana Jónsdóttir is not so much an Icelanders as she is a woman. This strong awareness of being a woman in a patriarchal world is typical of Icelandic women writers up to the present day.

THE FIRST WOMEN AUTHORS

The advent of the suffrage movement in the nineteenth century marked a turning point in the history of women and Icelandic women's literature. One of the major pioneers in the movement in Iceland was Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir (1856–1940). In 1885 she published an article in the newspaper *Fjallkonan* concerning the education and rights of women, the first article to appear in print by an Icelandic woman, and two years later she delivered Iceland's first public lecture by a woman. In 1894 the Icelandic Women's Society was established, the first women's organization dedicated

to equal rights between the sexes. In 1895 two women's magazines were launched, *Kvennablaðið* (The women's journal) in Reykjavík and *Framsókn* (Progress) in Seyðisfjörður. The Icelandic Federation for Women's Rights was founded in 1907 and the first women's trade union in 1914. On 19 June 1915 Icelandic women were granted limited suffrage; the constitution of 1918 awarded them full suffrage with the right to vote and run for office.

Torfhildur Hólm (1845–1918), another pioneer of the suffrage movement in Iceland, is the first woman in Iceland who can be termed a professional writer as well as the first Icelander to make a career of writing. Her first novel, *Brynjólfur Sveinsson biskup* (1882; Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson), is not only the first Icelandic novel by a woman but also the first historical novel in modern Icelandic literature. Unlike their counterparts in many other countries, early women writers in Iceland generally did not attempt fiction, perhaps because of the strong male tradition of the sagas.

Torfhildur Hólm's writing career began during the years she lived in Canada, where she compiled folktales and other lore from interviews with fellow immigrants. She wrote six long novels in all as well as short stories for children and adults, and she was the founder and editor of three periodicals: *Draupnir* (1891–1908; Odin's ring); a magazine for children, *Tíbrá* (1892–93; Mirage); and *Dvöl* (1901–17; Sojourn).

All Torfhildur Hólm's novels are about recognized historical subjects. In *Elding* (1889; Lightning) she deals with Iceland's conversion to Christianity, and, in addition to her novel about Bishop Brynjólfur, she wrote novels about the country's two other famous bishops, *Jón biskup Vídalín* (1891–92) and *Jón biskup Arason* (1896–1902). *Kjartan og Guðrún* (1886; Kjartan and Guðrún) is based on the female perspective of *Laxdæla saga*, much like Júlíana Jónsdóttir's drama *Víg Kjartans Ólafssonar*. Torfhildur Hólm's novels are overburdened with historical information, which she seems to use to justify her writings. But this feature in particular came to characterize much of the literature written by Icelandic women, especially memoirs and autobiographies.

The struggle for women's rights during this period was primarily aimed at increasing educational opportunities, and this subject preoccupied the earliest women writers. In her short stories, published in *Sögur og ævintýri* (1884; Stories and fairy tales), Torfhildur Hólm often addresses the issue of women's education and their position in marriage. The stories are often told from the viewpoint of men, who are sometimes envious of women's education, until they comprehend the issues and start to advocate women's liberation, or are sometimes made laughable with grotesque humor. In the story "Týndu Hringarnir" (The lost rings) a young woman's education

results in a broken engagement because her university-educated fiancé cannot tolerate the fact that she is more knowledgeable than he is.

Torfhildur Hólm was a young widow with no children, which explains her prolific output as a writer and the opportunity that she had for pursuing pioneering work. At any rate there is an unequivocal correlation between the literary pursuits of women during this period and their marital state. Júlíana Jónsdóttir was unmarried, as was Guðbjörg Árnadóttir (1826–1911), whose *Nokkur ljóðmæli* (1879; A few poems) was the second collection of poems to be published by an Icelandic woman. Nor did Torfhildur Hólm escape the consequences of a tendency to mix her role as a writer with her role as a woman. The stipend given to her by the Icelandic parliament for writing and for being the first woman to pursue such work aroused much opposition, both in parliament and in the press; as a result, the amount of the stipend was reduced and changed to a widow's pension. Torfhildur Hólm commented on this in a letter written around the turn of the century: "I was the first that nature condemned to harvest those bitter fruits of the antiquated, deeply rooted prejudice against literary ladies" (Gíslason, "Torfhildur Þorsteinsdóttir Holm," viii).

The women's magazines played an important role in women's literature during this period. They printed anonymous short stories that were probably by Icelandic women, and in 1901 Hulda's first poems appeared in *Framsókn*. In 1911 the Women's Reading Club of Reykjavík was founded, and for twenty years it collected women's original and translated works and circulated them among its members as a handwritten bulletin called *Mánaðarrit* (1912–31; Monthly). The periodical *19. júní*, established in 1917 and named for the day on which Icelandic women gained the vote, printed a great deal of women's literature. The magazine *Dropar* (1927, 1929; Drops) printed poetry and sketches exclusively by women.

Many of the earliest stories by women concern the mistreatment of women and children, often caused by a man's drinking, and they advocate temperance and Christianity. The first contemporary novel by an Icelandic woman, *Kaupstadarferðir* (1888; Trips to town) by Ingibjörg Skaftadóttir (1867–1945), deals with a farmer's drinking and its consequences for his family and home. A Christian message is the underpinning of the works of Guðrún Lárusdóttir (1880–1938), who not only wrote numerous novels and short stories for both children and adults but also translated Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was published as *Tómas frændi* in 1901. Like many other works by women in this period, Guðrún Lárusdóttir's stories are about single mothers, children, and the poor and underprivileged in society.

María Jóhannsdóttir (1886–1924) published short stories and poems in magazines. Her only novel, *Systurnar frá Grænadal* (1906; The sisters from Grænadal), concerns the dissimilar destinies of two sisters — one lives for love, is jilted, and flees to North America; the other finds satisfaction in staying home and devoting herself to the needy. The narrative is fragmented and in parts epistolary, a characteristic of many stories by women during this period, which suggests that letters provided an inspiration for women's writing.

Ólafía Jóhannsdóttir (1863–1924) spent much of her life in Norway, where she cared for indigent women in hospitals and prisons. Her short stories, collected in *De ulykkeligste: Livsskildringer fra Kristiania* (1916) and published in Icelandic as *Aumastar allra* (1923; Most wretched of all), are based on this experience and are unique in Icelandic literature. They deal with prostitutes, female offenders, and women with syphilis — all taboo subjects. Ólafía Jóhannsdóttir is also the author of the first full-length autobiography published by an Icelandic woman, *Frá myrkri til ljóss* (1925; From darkness to light), which tells of her decision to devote her life to religion. But it also contains revealing glimpses of life in Reykjavík during her childhood. She is especially concerned with women's lives, which she frequently sees as a reflection of her own. In the following sketch the woman reading becomes a kind of warning sign for the author: "I was sent on some errands to a house in town. First I knocked on the front door, but no one answered. Then I opened the kitchen door. There everything was chaos, heaped on tables, benches, the hearth, wherever I looked. I walked to the parlor door, which stood ajar. The same confusion was over everything, no matter what, but in the midst of the heap sat a woman, half-dressed and absorbed in a storybook, completely out of her senses" (*Frá myrkri til ljóss*, 26–27).

“EVERYTHING I EVER HAD WAS INADEQUATE”

Ólöf Sigurðardóttir of Hlaðir (1857–1933) is one of the most distinctive poets in Icelandic literature around the turn of the century. She published two books of poetry with the same title, *Nokkur smákvæði* (1888; Some little verses) and *Nokkur smákvæði* (1913). A selection of her poems, short stories, and sketches appeared in *Ritsafn* (1945; Collected works). Ólöf of Hlaðir spent most of her life in the country on a small farm in Eyjafjörður. At an early age she contracted tuberculosis, which left her disabled. For a time she worked as a midwife but never had children of her own. In her poetry she often personifies her poems as children, as in "Til hinna ófæddu" (To the

unborn), in *Ritsafn*, in which she calls her poems her “thought-children.” The poem is her autobiography in a nutshell. Like her other poems, it is characterized by pathos, negation, and metaphors of littleness: “But never was I created bonny or fair / . . . / I was born little and utterly wretched” (*Ritsafn*, 61, 62). In her poems she scrutinizes her self-image, defining herself as a poet and someone who is different from other women. In the poem “Ó, gæti hún þó dáið” (Oh, if but only it could die), in *Nokkur smákveði* (1913), which deals with futile, undefined desire, she says: “When the damsels attend to the latest fashion, / and men have their minds on the crop, / and the women cook and care for their brood, / I sit with the poems that I begot” (16). She writes panegyrics to established male poets whom she admires and with whom she compares herself. In “Óðulin mín” (My estate), also in *Nokkur smákveði*, she says that she has inherited “a grain of sand / in the ode masters’ land” (51). She wants to sail to this land, but, not knowing how to navigate, she loses her way and runs aground.

Ólöf’s poems are highly personal and deal mainly with the poet herself as she contemplates being a woman and a poet. They are the products of want and intense longing, describing rebellion and strong conflict as well as disappointment, defeat, and surrender, often lamenting what never was. “Everything I ever had was inadequate” (*Ritsafn*, 161), she says in “Þreyta” (Fatigue). Ólöf’s poems contain various innovations in Icelandic poetics. They deal with daily life, are more realistic and colloquial than was customary, and are often very ironic.

Like other women at this time, Ólöf of Hlaðir drew on the oral tradition of women and wrote fairy tales. But, here, she also used her own life as literary material, and the sketch “Bernskuheimili mitt” (My childhood home), which appeared in 1906 in the journal *Einreiðin*, was the first printed autobiographical piece by an Icelandic woman. Her realistic, unadorned descriptions of rural life clashed with the image that Icelanders had of themselves and created a great uproar. In her descriptions of her environment and the details of daily life—including clothing, bed linens, and bad food—everything is characterized by want, poverty, squalor, and ignorance. In this respect they anticipate Málfríður Einarsdóttir’s much later descriptions of her childhood.

Ólöf of Hlaðir is the first Icelandic author to attempt to tell a story from an inside point of view. This technique is used in the fragment “Hjálpin” (The saving grace), which she apparently began shortly after her marriage in 1887. The point of view is directly connected to a state of mind that had not previously been treated in Icelandic literature. “She was afraid, terribly, terribly afraid, on the day they married,” the story begins, and the narra-

tion unfolds within the anguished and apprehensive thoughts of a young woman as she is getting dressed in her wedding gown (*Ritsafn*, 165).

In the short story “Móðir snillingsins” (Mother of the genius) Ólöf goes against society’s ideology concerning the proper behavior of women. The story is about an unmarried woman who decides to have a child as she wants to “become the mother of a fine man.” She succeeds, but she never recovers from the strain, goes mad, and dies. The stated purpose of the story is to give readers a glimpse “into the psyche of women” (*Ritsafn*, 229, 249), and it contains various notable features that were later to occur more regularly in women’s literature. It is told largely through a series of letters, with some dialogue, as an older woman corresponds with a younger one about the fate of a third. The story, which reveals a woman’s secrets, is narrated in confidence and based largely on gossip. It revolves mostly around illness and death, and it is the first to contain the theme of the madwoman whose mental state is the direct consequence of her revolt against the female role. The ideal man, the object of the desire expressed in the story, is no ordinary man but an artist.

“LEND ME WINGS”

Around the turn of the century a group of women writers emerged who developed a new form of *þulur* (sg. *þula*; see also pp. 346, 477), an old genre of oral litany characterized by fantasy, rhapsodic structure, and fragments of nursery rhymes and other kinds of folk poetry. The most prominent figure in this group was Unnur Benediktsdóttir Bjarklind (1881–1946), who chose to hide her identity with the pseudonym Hulda, meaning “fairy” or “hidden one.” In addition to her contribution to the *þulur* genre, Hulda became one of the main proponents of symbolism. Praised but misinterpreted in her own time, she had an enormous literary output that included seven volumes of poetry, nine short story collections, and one novel.

In her memoirs Hulda tells about her first attempts at writing poetry and how she was found out. She hides in anguish and shame, recalling the passage in “Grasaferð” concerning the propriety of women writing poetry: “It was as if I stood utterly naked for all the world to see. It was ghastly. ‘Writing poetry,’ as it says in Jónas [Hallgrímsson]’s ‘Grasaferð,’ ‘has never been regarded as becoming to womenfolk’” (Hulda, *Úr minningablöðum*, 49). In her poetry Hulda deals with her position as a woman and a poet, and one can argue that her struggle for a place in a literary tradition dominated by men towers over other aspects of her poetry (Richter, “Ljóðafugl lítinn jeg geymi”). In “Haukurinn” (The hawk), which appeared in her

first book of poetry, *Kvæði* (1909; Poems), she likens herself to a songbird that yearns for the freedom of the great, powerful hawk: “A little poem-bird I keep — / it longs to take flight / far out in the radiant day / and sing, filled with delight” (*Kvæði*, 53). If the little bird is not allowed to fly, “soon it shall die.”

With her *þulur*, which appeared first in the magazine *Ingólfur* in 1905 and then in *Kvæði*, Hulda frees herself from traditional formal constraints and revives the oral tradition of folk poetry. The language is simple, there are no stanza breaks, the line length is variable, the rhythm is irregular, and rhyme and alliteration are handled freely. At the same time there is a great deal of repetition, and allusions to other poems are common. Thus, the *þula* “Ljáðu mér vængi” (Lend me wings) begins with a fragment from an old *þula* for children that is then further developed: “Mother Gray Goose! Lend me wings / so I might soar / south over seas.” The poem displays the intense — and always unfulfilled — longing that is so characteristic of the poems of Icelandic women. The bird flies away and leaves the poet behind on the cold shore: “For me she did not linger — / beyond the cliff high and sheer / I saw her glide and glide / into blue space far and wide, / the uncharted space blue and clear” (*Kvæði*, 23).

In drawing on oral tradition, Hulda also sympathetically reinterprets famous female characters. In the poem “Brynhildur Buðladóttir” she gives this femme fatale of the heroic Eddic poems psychological depth, explaining her as a woman who would not “tolerate treachery and compromise / sorrow and disgrace / in a lean pantry” (*Kvæði*, 103–5) (see also p. 21).

Hulda also played a major role in the revival of prose, and her lyric story “Síðsumarskvöld” (A late summer evening), in volume 2 of *Æskuástir* (1919; Young loves), is no less innovative than Sigurður Nordal’s “Hel” (Death; in Norse mythology also the goddess of death, in *Fornar ástir*), which was published in the same year and hailed as a milestone in Icelandic literature (see pp. 329, 367). Hulda’s story is a letter written by a woman confiding to another woman, her close friend. She sits at the window in the evening and reminisces about her secret trysts with her lover, a poet who has gone away. In her memories she moves back and forth in time and space, talking with the lover as she does with the friend, and sometimes the narrative dissolves into his poetry. In *Myndir* (1924; Vignettes), a collection of lyric prose texts representing a completely new genre, Hulda continues to develop these techniques — the setting is a foreign country, the form fragmented, and the distinction between myth, dream, and reality blurred.

In Hulda’s works the longings of the female protagonists constantly

clash with society's norms. The women take refuge in nature, where they either are alone or have a secret lover. The conflict between woman's role and freedom, between confinement and the desire to go out into the world, between duty and the creative urge, is the impetus in her poetry. Under the polished surface mysticism and horror prevail, and images of birds, wings, and flight are predominant.

With time Hulda's literary career begins to show signs of reconciliation, a pattern that is seen in the careers of many Icelandic women authors. The novel *Dalafólk* (1936–39; Valley people) is a bildungsroman about a young woman who is possessed by a strong desire for freedom and ventures out into the world. But she comes around and returns home, where her fiancé is waiting for her. She decides to accept the narrow horizon of her community, work for charity, and preserve the nation's cultural heritage (see also pp. 347, 388).

With her *pulur* Hulda transformed Icelandic poetry. Her poems were very well received, and Hulda is one of the few Icelandic women writers to win recognition from the literary establishment. Much was written about her *pulur* in the press, where she was praised either for her agreeable disposition, for the childlike innocence and beauty of her poems, or for "thinking as logically and forcefully as men" (Erlingsson, "Annar pistill til Þjóðviljans," 11). One critic was pleased with the form of her poetry but not its content, which he called "weak, wavering female hankerings and dreams, which most men cannot make heads or tails of anyhow" (Guðlaugsson, "Bókafregn," 194).

Women poets found in the *pula* an outlet for their emotions and yearnings. Theodora Thoroddsen's *Pulur* (1916) consisted exclusively of poems in this form, and Ólína Andrésdóttir (1858–1935) collected her popular *pulur* in *Ljóðmæli* (1924; Poems), which she published with her twin sister, Herdís (1858–1939). In her second book of poetry Ólöf of Hlaðir published a *pula* that sparked the first formal dispute in Iceland over women's literature. In a review of the book in a 1914 issue of *Skírnir* Guðmundur Finnbogason connected the *pula* to femininity, thus personifying it as a woman. Calling the *pula* a "feminine meter," he claimed that the genre is "not bound to any law" and is, thus, "frivolous, ever-changing, and capricious" ("Ólöf Sigurðardóttir," 101–2). Theodora Thoroddsen challenged this notion in her preface to her earliest *pulur*, which she published that same year in the next issue of *Skírnir*. She offers another explanation, one based on her own experience: women compose *pulur* to keep children occupied; they are a last resort for getting the peace and quiet to mend clothes and darn socks. Theodora Thoroddsen often addresses children in

her *pulur*, as Steinunn Finnsdóttir did in her *rímur* two centuries before. Herdís Andrésdóttir's autobiographical poem "Kveðið við spuna" (Composed while spinning), in *Ljóðmæli*, in which spinning, composing and chanting poetry, and caring for children all take place at the same time, is likewise addressed to children.

Theodora Thoroddsen also wrote quatrains and published poetic essays in which she attributes her verses to various anonymous women. Her short stories in *Eins og gengur* (1920; As things go) usually deal with something she has heard or been told and, thus, border on autobiography and fiction. In "Sniglarnir mínir" (My snails) she depicts an event from her life as a housewife. At the same time the story deals with her desire to write and her silence as a writer. After finding snails in the soil of some imported potatoes and putting them in a pot plant on the window sill, she fantasizes about their journey across the ocean and then their escape when she opens the balcony door during housecleaning. She imagines how their story would have been in Hans Christian Andersen's telling of it and ends the story by silencing herself: "I have even wanted to try writing their story, as eventful and magnificent as it seems to me. But I won't be so bold as to write a fairy tale. In my opinion that would require more than I have at my disposal" (*Ritsafn*, 279).

"I SHALL BECOME A WRITER"

The period from 1920 to 1950 saw the development of the novel at the hands of several women writers who were among the most prolific of the twentieth century. Kristín Sigfúsdóttir (1876–1953), a farmer's wife in Eyjafjörður, began to write after her oldest children were grown. She wrote her first story, "Digra Gudda" (Tubby Gudda), for a handwritten bulletin produced by youngsters in the district. She went on to write more stories for the bulletin, and these became the core of her short story collection *Sögur úr sveitinni* (1924; Stories from the country). Her first published work was the play *Tengdamamma* (1923; Mother-in-law), the first play published in Iceland by a woman (see p. 561). The novel *Gestir* (1925; Guests) was followed by the two-volume *Gömul saga* (1927–28; Old story). Kristín Sigfúsdóttir's collected works appeared in three volumes as *Rit* (1949–51; Writings). At first her stories were well received by the critics, who were impressed that the author was a poor, uneducated farmer's wife. The reviews gradually became harsher, and in 1927 one reviewer said that he was "afraid that Kristín Sigfúsdóttir has started writing too much" (Sigurðsson, "Bækur," 185). She took him at his word and stopped writing. Thus, her literary career spanned only five years.

Kristín Sigfúsdóttir's stories are in the spirit of social realism. She writes a great deal about women's hard lives—the drudgery, exploitation, forced marriages, illness, disillusionment, madness, and death. Frequently, the women in her stories are fleeing from one settlement to another in search of a better place, where they end up either in a degrading marriage or on a remote farm on the heath, isolated or even mad. The narration is driven by gossip or rumor centering on an enigmatic female figure who is not what she seems but is, nevertheless, different from others, usually a stranger and an outsider who harbors a secret sorrow in her mysterious past. The narrator is often an onlooker, witnessing the action instead of participating in it. The short story “Þeim var ek verst” (I was worst to the one —), which appeared in a 1929 issue of *19. júní*, borrows Guðrún's famous words in *Laxdæla saga*, “I was worst to the one I loved the most” (*Laxdæla saga*, trans. Magnusson and Pálsson, 238), to explore the psychology of a woman named Þórey, who has long been an enigma in the district. The narrator is a younger woman who accompanies Þórey as the two make their way home from a trip to the village for provisions. Along the way Þórey, who has been drinking, reveals the incident of betrayal and loss in her youth that has destroyed her and left her bitter, withdrawn, and filled with self-recrimination. The main scene typifies many of Kristín Sigfúsdóttir's stories, in which older, more experienced women share their experiences with younger women, advocating self-sacrifice and the surrender of one's dreams. Thus, her works often end on a note of reconciliation that belies their rebellious content.

Elínborg Lárusdóttir (1891–1973) wrote a number of novels, short stories, biographies, and tracts on spiritualism and other subjects. Her first novel, *Anna frá Heiðarkoti* (1936; *Anna of Heiðarkot*), deals with an innocent country girl who is debauched in the city, a subject very much pondered by women writers at this time. One of Elínborg Lárusdóttir's most ambitious works is the trilogy *Förumenn* (1939–40; *Tramps*), a historical novel about vagabonds of bygone days who wandered from one farm to another, begging for food and shelter. In her various short stories, especially the later ones, Elínborg Lárusdóttir treats gender roles and male behavior in a comic fashion. “Mikill maður” (Great man), collected in *Svipmyndir* (1965; *Snapshots*), is about a husband whose greatest fear is that his wife is superior to him. “Einn dagur” (One day), in *Leikur örlaganna* (1958; *Game of fate*), describes a wife who carries out her domestic duties with silence and forbearance until one evening when she rebels and attends a meeting on women's rights, leaving the men of the house in the dark.

Oddný Guðmundsdóttir (1908–85) published five novels as well as short stories that appeared in magazines like *Melkorka* (1944–62), a journal of women's politics and culture. Her protagonists are often strong, inde-

pendent women who are fighting public opinion. The novel *Veltiár* (1946; Years of plenty) takes place during the war and tells about a young woman who has had a child with a British soldier. Like many other novels of the period it criticizes the foreign occupation of Iceland. Yet it sympathetically adopts the perspective of a woman *í ástandinu* (lit. “in the situation”) — a euphemism for women’s fraternizing with soldiers, which was severely castigated in men’s novels as wanton and treasonous behavior (see also p. 414). In the story “Stefnuvottar” (Constables), published in *Melkorka* in 1958, men are portrayed as obtuse in matters concerning women’s lives and literature. The narrator, a woman in her seventies, gets the idea to tell about her life experiences, however insignificant they may be. But as she is, by her own estimate, “barely able to write” and does not know how to put her thoughts into “poetic dress,” she asks her grandson — a writer, as it happens — to write down what she says. The grandson and his friend, who is also an author, do not find what the old woman has to say about her long life very remarkable and want to improve on her account by editing it. She gives up, breaks off her story, and never again speaks about literature “with a single soul” (Kress, ed., *Draumur um veruleika*, 116–22).

Ragnheiður Jónsdóttir (1895–1967) is best known as an author of children’s books, but she has also written notable works of fiction for adults, significant in their use of ambiguity to expose the deceptive surfaces of daily life. In all her novels women are the protagonists and often narrators as well. They must contend with much conflict and anguish, either because of love affairs or because of a desire to make something of themselves as artists, writers, or educated women. Her plots, as in *Arfur* (1941; Inheritance) and *Villieldur* (1967; Wildfire), often conceal gruesome events — violence, treachery, murder, or the contemplation of murder — beneath an innocent surface. The quartet *Ég á gull að gjalda* (1954; I have gold to give), *Aðgát skal höfð* (1955; Have heed), *Sárt brenna gómarnir* (1958; Burned fingers), and *Og enn spretta laukar* (1964; The lilies still grow) is a bildungsroman that traces the story of Þóra from her childhood in the country until she is a mature married woman in Reykjavík. Þóra has a strong desire for an education and also longs to be a writer, but at the same time she suffers from a sense of guilt toward her daughter and family. The story is Þóra’s autobiography, as indicated by the subtitle, *Úr minnisblöðum Þóru frá Hvamm* (From the notes of Þóra of Hvammur), and is told in the first person and the present tense. But there is no mention in the story that she is writing it, thus suppressing the woman writer.

The earliest works by Þórunn Elfa Magnúsdóttir (1910–95) — the short story collection *Dætur Reykjavíkur* (1933; Daughters of Reykjavík) and the

novel *Vorið hlær* (1934, 1938; The spring laughs), both in the three-volume collection *Dætur Reykjavíkur* — concern the lives of young women in Reykjavík during this period. The protagonist and narrator in *Vorið hlær* is Svala, and the novel begins with her oath on her twenty-first birthday: “I, Svala Egilson, hereby swear, I shall become a writer, and I invoke all good spirits in the fulfillment of this resolution!” (*Dætur Reykjavíkur*, 2:5). The story then describes the difficulties that she encounters, such as the discouraging response of publishers and several tempting offers of marriage.

The style of *Vorið hlær* is generally playful and makes extensive use of colloquialisms and slang, which at that time were novelties in Icelandic literature. Early in the novel Svala announces her poetics in a conversation with her mother, who is of the old school: “Mother dear, nobody writes a modern novel from Reykjavík in one-thousand-year-old Norwegian. We write in Icelandic, which is still in the making, and if need be, in the language we speak in Reykjavík, . . . even if those words would not tip the scales of the classics” (*Dætur Reykjavíkur*, 2:50). Svala’s dreams of becoming a writer are not pursued further, and they evaporate as the novel shifts to a love story. Þórunn Elfa Magnúsdóttir’s subsequent fiction is in the vein of social realism and the style more traditional. In these works Þórunn Elfa Magnúsdóttir is concerned with the condition of women, especially in marriage, and the common conflict between career and family. In the novel *Dísa Mjöll* (1953), subtitled *Scenes from the Life of a Woman Artist*, the conflict between domestic duty and art becomes so intense that it leads to a suicide attempt. The novels *Snorrabraut 7* (1947) and *Sambýlisfólk* (1954; Neighbors) depict young married couples and their ordeals when building a house, a subject that would appear later in the stories of Svava Jakobsdóttir.

The enormously prolific Guðrún Árnadóttir of Lundur (1887–1973) wrote period romances about family clans and rural life. Her bestsellers established a genre that continues to attract numerous women writers up to the present day. She began writing at an early age, but on her marriage she burned everything she had written. In her early fifties she took up writing again and quickly became Iceland’s most productive and most-read author. Her first novel, and her best-known, is *Dalalíf* (1946–51; Valley life), published in five volumes. The novel is a broad description of rural life, with repressed emotions and forbidden love. It tells the story of a great farmer — powerful, passionate, tender — with whom all the women are smitten. As in her other novels passion is the force that drives the plot forward, but the women experience love only as secret longings that are never fulfilled. In the end they must accept their lot and content themselves with their romantic dreams.

Guðrún Finnsdóttir (1884–1946) emigrated west across the Atlantic at the age of twenty and settled in Winnipeg, Canada. Early on, she had dreamed of “writing poems and stories — especially stories — but the opportunity did not come until late, after the children were grown up” (Einarsson, “Vestur-íslensk skáldkona,” 144). She published two collections of short stories, *Hillingalönd* (1938; Enchanted lands) and *Dagsbriðar spor* (1946; Tracks of the day’s struggle), but some of her stories had appeared previously in periodicals. Her narrators are often elderly people who reflect on the past. “Traustir máttarviðir” (Sturdy timbers) tells the story of an old woman who had long ago “dreamt childish dreams of poetry.” She is described as two women — one old and Canadian, the other young and Icelandic. The Icelandic woman belongs to poetry that the old woman tries to suppress, convinced that in a happy home life she has found the fulfillment of her dreams: “At times, though, in moments of solitude, the young Icelandic girl entered her thoughts, looking at Þórhildur with accusing eyes that said: ‘You have failed me, buried me alive at the bottom of a chest with yellowed sheets of paper.’” After much internal conflict the old woman finally comes to terms with her life, and the story ends with acceptance. She looks out over the land and realizes that, “with the bright eyes of the little girl who tried to write poetry such a long time ago, she saw the beauty around her.” She envisions her children disappearing into the flow of human life to do their part: “They were her poems, imbued with life and soul” (*Dagsbriðar spor*, 27–28).

Iceland — its national character, culture, and landscape — is, likewise, a utopia in the poetry of Jakobína Johnson (1883–1977). As a child she emigrated with her family to America, where she lived mainly in Seattle. In spite of a large family and many household responsibilities, she took an active role in the cultural life of the Icelandic emigrants. Many of her poems appeared in periodicals before they were collected in *Kertaljós* (1938; Candlelight); later, she published a book of verse for children, *Sá ég svani* (1942; Swans I saw). In addition she translated many works of Icelandic literature into English. She also worked tirelessly to promote her native country, traveling widely, and delivering lectures about Iceland. In the introduction to the complete collection of her poetry, *Kertaljós* (1955), the editor marvels at her output, saying: “She developed the effective habit of having paper, a pencil, and a book handy on the ledge of the cookstove. In a brief moment — while the food was cooking . . . she could read a short poem or a page in a textbook, or jot down a good word or a line of verse that came

to mind” (Friðriksson, “Um höfundinn,” ix). This recalls the description of Kristín Sigfúsdóttir quoted above. Although one woman is in Iceland and the other in America, their situation as writers is the same.

In many ways, the stories of Arnrún of Fell, the pen name of Guðrún Tómasdóttir (1886–1972), are pioneering works. They appeared in periodicals in North America, where she emigrated at the age of forty. Her first story, “Fiskur í alla mata” (Fish at every meal), was printed in *Tímarit Þjóðræknisfélags Íslendinga í Vesturheimi* (Journal of the Icelandic National League in North America) in 1922; her only book, the short story collection *Margs verða hjúin vís* (The servants know many things), was published in Reykjavík in 1956. Her stories, which are set in Reykjavík, are about the city’s young women, who are much like those portrayed in the early stories of Þórunn Elfa Magnúsdóttir. The narrative voice is playful, the style light and fluid, and the idiom contemporary, incorporating many of the colloquialisms and slangy terms of city life. In Arnrún’s stories a new image of woman emerges in Icelandic literature. Like so many women’s stories they portray the conflict between the generations, but they reject the past and side with the modern woman.

SILENT POETS

Overshadowed during this period by fiction, poetry had several practitioners. Many women composed traditional poems with a moral or religious message, such as Margrét Jónsdóttir (1893–1971), Erla (Guðfinna Þorsteinsdóttir; 1891–1972), and Hugrún (Filippía Kristjánsdóttir; 1905–96), and they all wrote a great deal for children as well.

Guðfinna Jónsdóttir of Hamrar (1899–1946) published her first poems in her early forties, only a few years before her death. Her works consist of *Ljóð* (1941; Poems), *Ný ljóð* (1945; New poems), and the posthumous *Ljóðabók* (1972; A book of poems), which included some previously unpublished poems. Her training in music is reflected throughout her poems, which show a preoccupation with sounds, often those that arise from a deep silence. Significant too in this regard are the titles of her poems, such as “Rokkhljóð” (Hum of the spinning wheel), “Undirspil” (Accompaniment), and “Þagnargull” (Golden silence). The inspiration for the poems is nature, the earth itself, which she invokes as her muse in “Yrkisföng” (Poetry-trove), in *Ný ljóð*: “Be lavish, Earth, / with your poetry-trove, / while the spring / stirs in me song, / for short is my life, / but art is long” (*Ný ljóð*, 64). Her perception of nature is physical and, as in “Heiðakyrrið” (Heath stillness), in *Ljóð*, almost erotic: “I walked around Víðihlíð one

spring day / and slipped off my shoe with care / and felt the warm, alluring joy, / as the birches struck my ankle bare” (*Ljóð*, 71). Often, the imagery of nature is associated with concealment, privacy, and stealth, in dialogue with unfulfilled longing. In “Dýnskógur” (Whistling woods), in *Ný ljóð*, the poet identifies with the destruction of the land, especially the woods that have been cut down, at the same time that she gives the silence a voice: “The whistling woods call me / vanished, felled, burned” (*Ný ljóð*, 34). In one of her last poems, “Mig dreymir enn” (Still I dream), in *Ljóðabók*, nature has disappeared into the world of the mind: “Still I dream and dream. / The dreamlands are mine. / I traversed them with fire / that no one could see. / I hide in foliage / while life passes by” (*Ljóðabók*, 131).

Sigríður Einars of Munaðarnes (1893–1973) published her first book, *Kveður í runni* (Chants from a thicket), in 1930; it includes translations of poems by the Norwegian poet Sigbjørn Obstfelder as well as two original prose poems, “Nótt” (Night) and “Dauðinn” (Death). Other poems in the volume are traditional in form, but there is more to them than meets the eye, for they parody themselves with the inversion of accepted ideas and a glaring discrepancy between subject and style. This is especially true of the love poems, in which the poet makes fun of her own romantic feelings — the sleepiness nights and the obsessed thoughts of *him*. In “Tragískur ástaróður” (Tragic ode of love), a hymn about a pale, wretched lover, the tone conveys pathos, but the imagery is grotesque. In choosing to be herself instead of submitting to the burdens of marriage, the poet turns the tables on the love poems of tradition and makes fun of them. In her next book, *Milli lækjar og ár* (1956; Between brook and river), she bridges the gap between modern and traditional poetry and becomes one of the main forerunners of modernism in Icelandic poetry, although she was greatly underrated (see Birgisdóttir, “Brúarsmiður — atómskáld — móðernisti”). Many of her poems depict the horrors of war, a dominant theme in the poetry of women in this period. She wrote numerous prose poems about nature, filled with images of autumn and dying vegetation. A few of the poems tell stories based on remembrances from her own life, and these narrative poems are also a characteristic of her last books, *Laufþytur* (1970; Rustle of leaves) and *Í svölu rjóðri* (1971; In a cool clearing).

A number of women poets of this generation who have disappeared beneath the surface of literary history have one thing in common: they published only one book, either at their own expense or through patronage, and their poetry went unnoticed when it appeared in print. All of them composed a kind of lament in which duty always stands in opposition to hope and desire. Their poems examine life in retrospect, a life that they

regard as lost. In the darkness and shadows that assault them they look to art — the poem — *to which* and *about which* they write, often seeing it as their sole comfort, purpose, and friend. Thus, their poems are frequently meta-texts, poems about the act of composition.

Among this group is María Bjarnadóttir (1896–1976), whose book of poetry *Haustlitir* (1964; Autumn colors) was not sold in bookstores and was never reviewed. Her poems are very sincere, as if she is confiding in the reader, with a distinctive subtle rhythm. In “Ljóðið” (The poem) she writes about her poems welling up from the silence. She takes refuge in the solitude and silence of her own soul, and “out of the stillness words began / to flow at last / and the soliloquy of my mind became / a little poem.” But the poem, which “was born to quiet / my restless heart,” never “produced a pitch that would reach / the ears of others, / only a prayer whispering out into / the long night” (*Haustlitir*, 118).

The poems of Þuríður Bjarnadóttir (1899–1973) were published posthumously under the title *Brotasilfur* (1985; Scrap silver). As the introduction aptly states, the book “belongs to the silent poets” (Steingrímisdóttir, “Formálsorð,” 7). Although Þuríður Bjarnadóttir was known as someone who could put together a quatrain, it was not until after her death that a notebook with the poems was discovered. “I write poetry from an inner need / and only for myself,” she says in the poem “Greinargerð” (Statement). In another, “Töðugjöldin” (Harvest home), she says that she “kneads her poetic fancy into her bread.” In “Til Braga” (To Bragi) she composes a love poem to the god of poetry, but he does not return her love: “I begged and beseeched you for your bounty and love, / thus with the chosen I might consort, / but your answer was this, no more and no less, / that silence was fitting for my sort” (*Brotasilfur*, 17, 36, 39).

Later in life Guðrún Árnadóttir of Oddsstaðir (1900–1965) published the book of poems *Gengin spor* (1949; Trodden trails). In one of his autobiographical works the author Kristmann Guðmundsson (see pp. 374–75) describes a trip to Oddsstaðir to see his cousin Guðrún in 1910, when he was eight years old and she was ten and “knew how to play the harmonica.” They hiked to a waterfall across from the farm, where she confided to him that she intended to be a poet: “‘If I dare,’ she added. I still remember these words because I didn’t understand them. ‘I’m going to be a poet, too,’ I said, and in fact I had made that decision a long time ago. But the difference was that, for me, there was no lurking doubt that I both dared to do it and could do it” (Guðmundsson, *Ísöld hin svarta*, 66–67, 72–73).

Gengin spor is very innovative for women’s literature of its time. The poems alternate between women’s traditional laments over unfulfilled de-

sires and a life that has run out and, on the other hand, direct, critical anger. They often reveal a fear of imminent attack, a common theme in women's literature. "Lítill dísi" (Little nymph) conveys menace in the form of a nursery rhyme:

Now, behave yourself,
little nymph of cheer.
The man in the dark,
he is capable of anything.
The man in the dark,
he has his eye on you,
if ever he gets you,
he'll never let you go.

In "Ekkert svar" (No reply) the poet accuses Duty of killing her soul, but there is no reply except endless demands: "Is the porridge steaming, / is the mending complete, / are the shoes all brushed at last? / Are the floors gleaming, / is the bread fit to eat, / and the loose button sewn fast?" In "Litla ljóðið" (The little poem) she refers to her poetry as "chopping pain into words." Existing solely for her, the poem is silent and "has nothing to convey to anyone else" (*Gengin spor*, 88, 32, 14).

THE FIRST SIGNS OF MODERNISM

Around 1950 important changes began to occur in women's literature. The first signs of modernism emerge in poems and short stories, which seem to be the forms that have best suited Icelandic women writers through the ages.

Halldóra B. Björnsson is a pioneer in Icelandic literature who is generally unappreciated and whose contributions to Icelandic literary history are, thus, largely unknown. Her published works include three volumes of poetry — *Ljóð* (1949; Poems), *Víð sanda* (already discussed), and the posthumous *Jarðljóð* (1968; Earth poems) — in addition to *Trumban og lútan* (1959; The tambour and the lute), containing translations of poetry from Greenland, Africa, and China, and her translation of the Old English poem *Beowulf*, *Bjólfskviða* (1983).

In the 1950s and 1960s Halldóra B. Björnsson was very active in the struggle of Icelandic women for culture and peace. She was the editor of *19. júní* and published *Pennaslóðir* (1959; Pen paths), an anthology of short stories by Icelandic women. At that time the women's movement was focused on the foreign military presence in Iceland, the subject of her post-

humorous collection of tracts in *Jörð í álögum* (1969; Spellbound earth). Her memoirs, *Eitt er það land* (1955; There is a land), are among the most original in Icelandic literature. They are told from the perspective of the child who creates a land of make-believe, a utopia where adults are excluded. The tone is humorous and playful, and everything contrary to real-world society can take place.

Parallels between earth, women, and children in contrast to a society of militarism, class struggle, racism, and patriarchy are dominant in Halldóra B. Björnsson's work, which is characterized by irony and pointed satire modulated by a subtle lyricism that echoes the refrains and rhythms of Icelandic folk verse. Halldóra B. Björnsson writes extensively about women — their position in society, their emotional life, and their hardships, often resulting from betrayal at the hands of men. Many of her poems portray women's common situations and experiences, which are often connected to their search for a place to be. In *Jarðljóð* she writes about Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman to orbit the earth in a spacecraft, and asks “the women of earth” to go outdoors with candles and lights, for “somewhere up there / is Valentina Tereskova / traveling alone / in dark space” (*Jarðljóð*, 49). Like Sigríður Einars, Halldóra B. Björnsson wrote narrative poems based on events in her own life. “Í skjóli Skarðsheiðar” (In the shelter of Skarðsheiði) tells the story of women who, during the war, take their children to the country to be safe from attacks, only to find a bomb in the field where the children are playing.

Like other Icelandic women poets, Halldóra B. Björnsson turns to women of the past. She greatly admired folk poetry and translated Jóhann Sigurjónsson's classic poem “Þjóðvísa” (Ballad), composed in Danish, about a young woman who loses her heart to a cavalier passing through. In her own “Þjóðvísur,” in *Víð sanda*, a woman sits at the window embroidering and watching life go by. In “Á þjóðminjasafninu” (At the national museum), in *Ljóð*, she tries to decipher the life of a long-departed woman on the basis of the embroidery on a displayed garment, the only remaining evidence of her existence. She questions the woman but receives no replies. The poem bears the characteristics that have since become common in women's poetry — the questioning voice, the mystery to be puzzled out, the silence.

Halldóra B. Björnsson's few but highly original short stories have appeared only in periodicals. They often depict women in a kind of no-man's-land, at the boundary between life and death. “Faðmlag dauðans” (1955; English trans.: “Death's Embrace,” in *Scandinavian Women Writers*, ed. Claréus [1989]), which originally appeared in the journal *Birtingur*, is a

detective story told from the perspective of a woman whose husband is strangling her in their bed. Another brief story, “Það vissi það enginn” (1956; Nobody knew), which also appeared in *Birtingur*, is a fantasy, one of the first in Icelandic literature. The story is told from the viewpoint of a woman who has committed suicide, yet she does not know why—and never finds out because she had told no one.

Arnfríður Jónatansdóttir (b. 1923) published her first poem, “Barn vildi byggja” (A child wanted to build), in *Embla*, a women’s literary journal that was issued during the period 1942–45. Her book of poetry *Þröskuldur hússins er hjól* (1958; The threshold of the house is a file) appeared at the height of the modernist revolution in Icelandic poetry but is nowhere mentioned in literary history or in studies of that subject. Her poems are surrealistic, with unexpected syntax and enigmatic metaphors, often drawn from the tradition of folk poetry and fairy tales. Many of them are satires of war and patriarchy, but the problem of poetic creation is also a conspicuous theme. In “Þú vitjar mín” (You visit me), which is about the tradition within which her poems are written, Arnfríður Jónatansdóttir compares this tradition to a high cliff and the poem to a shadow that is threading its way along a narrow trail and must hurry to keep up with the “master” in the lead: “The shadow of my primitive poem threads its way along a narrow trail.” In “Þrá” (Yearning), which evokes the descriptions of women in heroic Eddic poetry, the poet is both shackled and concealed: “On a wide sound-sea / a wind-spread sail. / Image-life of song and saga. / A maiden wakes. / Fettered in willow withes, / Hidden in flickering flames” (*Þröskuldur*, 11, 17).

The short stories of Ásta Sigurðardóttir (1930–71) mark the breakthrough of modernism not just in women’s prose but Icelandic prose in general. Ásta Sigurðardóttir’s first stories, “Sunnudagskvöld til mánudagsmorguns” (Sunday evening to Monday morning) and “Gatan í rigningu” (The street in rain), appeared in 1951 in the periodical *Líf og list* (Life and art), followed by *Draumurinn* (1952; The dream), a short story printed as a chapbook. The short story collection *Sunnudagskvöld til mánudagsmorguns* was published in 1961 with illustrations by the author, then reprinted in *Sögur og ljóð* (1985; Stories and poems) along with poems and additional stories.

Ásta Sigurðardóttir’s short stories, with their shocking subject matter and bold descriptions, caused a stir when they were first published. In a new literary style they portray the outcasts of middle-class society, especially women, and their utter alienation. Many of them focus on experiences that are specific to women—rape, abortion, motherhood. Through colloquial

language and domestic images they describe traumatic experiences, including assault and other acts of physical violence. The point of view is often naive or surprised, the narrators lost in their fantasies, numbed by alcohol, or gripped by an obsession. “Í hvaða vagni?” (1953; English trans.: “In What Carriage?” in *Scandinavian Women Writers*, ed. Claréus [1989]) is told from the perspective of a young girl who wanders the streets in search of her child, fathered by an American soldier and then taken away from her. On the constant lookout for baby carriages she waits for her chance to peek inside them at those moments when the mothers leave them unattended. She tries to make herself as invisible as possible, a fugitive from a society that shoos her away. The carriages are described with sensuous detail. They are of all models and classes, with different sorts of wheels, brakes, hoods and aprons, bedding, diapers, baby bottles, rattles, and the smells of baby powder and sour milk. The narration is fragmented as well as fluid, and the story has the effect of an endless loop.

Another of Ásta Sigurðardóttir’s short stories, “Frostrigning” (Freezing rain), unfolds in the mind of a man standing at his wife’s grave after driving her insane with suppression and violence and then killing her. Pervaded by horror, silence, and a sense of unease, the story is told in fragments and flashbacks. It describes a life of misery on a remote farm and the difficult journey of the man and his horse as they haul the woman’s coffin to the graveyard. The man is unable to tear himself away from the grave, as if he has not entirely finished her off and she will return to haunt him.

WOMEN’S RIGHTS AND OLD WIVES’ TALES

In the late 1960s the second wave of the feminist movement reached Iceland, and the Red Stockings movement was founded in 1970. Consciousness-raising was its main emphasis, encouraging women to share their experiences and recognize common issues. The movement spread widely, and its influence clearly explains why an unprecedented number of new women writers emerged in the next few years and why much of their work deals with the condition of women. In this group were older women — some of whom had engaged in literary activities previously but now turned to the vigorous pursuit of a writing career — such as Líný Jóhannesdóttir (1913–2002) and Málfríður Einarsdóttir (1899–1983). The sister of the famous sculptor Einar Jónsson, Guðný Jónsdóttir of Galtafell (1886–1978), published two books at the age of ninety, *Bernskuminningar* (1976; Childhood memories) and the novel *Brynhildur* (1978). Others used their final years for writing, such as Unnur Eiríksdóttir (1921–76), who published the novel *Villibirta*

(1969; Will-o'-the-wisp), the book of poems *Í skjóli háskans* (1971; Under danger's protection), and the short story collection *Hvítmánuður* (1974; White month). Drífa Viðar (1920–71), who had previously written feminist literary criticism for the periodical *Melkorka* as well as several short stories that appeared there, published the novel *Fjalldalslilja* (1967; Mountain lily) and the short story collection *Dagar við vatnið* (1971; Days at the lake).

Young authors emerged with stories that used the techniques of social realism to explore the role and position of women. Auður Haralds's (b. 1947) autobiographical novel *Hvunnudagsbetjan* (1979; The everyday hero) aroused a great deal of attention and controversy. With frankness as well as humor it depicts a single mother with three children, her conflicts with the children's fathers, and society's prejudices (see also p. 435). Ása Sólveig (b. 1945) published *Einkamál Stefaníu* (1978; Stefania's private affairs), which is about suburban life in Reykjavík and various women's issues—pregnancy, sexuality, psychological abuse in marriage. Her objective was to write about “what men do not know and women have kept silent about” (Ása Sólveig, “Það sem karlmenn þekkja ekki og konur þegja um,” 11).

It is worth noting that literature tends to precede public political discourse, blazing the trail, as it were. Between 1961 and 1965 so many novels by women were published that men reacted as if they were being threatened. The year 1964 saw the publication of twelve novels by women, compared with nine by men (Kress, “Listsköpun kvenna”). The same year marked the appearance of the label *kerlingabækur* (old wives' tales, superstitions), which over the next decade became the literary establishment's slogan equating women's literature with “old ladies' yarns” and, ultimately, their “scribblings.” The notion can be traced to a 1964 article by the author Sigurður A. Magnússon entitled “Engu að kvíða—kerlingarnar bjarga þessu” (Never fear—the old ladies are coming to the rescue). Here, Sigurður Magnússon discusses what he sees as the dim future of Icelandic literature, which is “in the hands of roughly eight or ten old ladies who are barely even literate in Icelandic.” Their books sell “like hotcakes,” he says, whereas the public “hardly acknowledges” the nation's promising young poets (Magnússon, *Sáð í vindinn*, 140). In an article the following year he refers to “the famous ‘kerlingabækur’ of recent years,” which shows that the term had become entrenched (*Sáð í vindinn*, 64).

As a pun that played on the word's literal sense, *kerlingabækur* was considered clever, especially since many women who were publishing books at this time were, in fact, old. For example, the best-selling author Guðrún of Lundur published her nineteenth volume in 1964, when she was in her late

seventies. While the term *kerlingabekur* was a big hit in some circles, it gave rise to an intense and often bitter debate about literature written by women. In a 1965 issue of *Skírnir*, in a review of Jakobína Sigurðardóttir's first short story collection, *Púunktur á skökkum stað* (1964; A period in the wrong place), the reviewer says that he firmly believes that "in this country too many women feel the urge to write." Granted, one might frequently "smile at our women's literature," but more commonly it is "irritation that gets the upper hand." In this regard the reviewer is pleased with Jakobína Sigurðardóttir's book, which he hopes will become, not only "an incentive for additional efforts" on the part of the author herself, but also "a lesson for some of her sisters to be more professional in their methods or else entrust their output to the fire" (Sveinsson, "Jakobína Sigurðardóttir," 218–19).

In *Íslendingaspjall* (1967; Icelanders' chat) Halldór Laxness challenges this attitude toward women's literature and discerns in the novels of Guðrún of Lundur and her peers a native and unbroken narrative tradition. Laxness views the popularity of these "distinctive storytellers" as unique in European culture. Furthermore, not only do they write better than academics by and large, but they are "storytellers in a direct line from our old fairy tale women" and are "resurrected in a new land, a transformed society, another world" (88–90). In a 1972 article Oddný Guðmundsdóttir linked the debate to the escalating women's movement by commenting: "Those learned men who are hired for their expertise in everything written can do something more useful than take out their frustrations on so-called *kerlingabekur*." But somehow, she adds, "the masters have to get even with those shrews who demand the same pay for the same work" ("Lærðir og leikir," 11). For her first novel Líney Jóhannesdóttir pointedly chose the title *Kerlingarslóðir* (1976; An old lady's paths), teasing the literary establishment's penchant for using the word *kerling* as an insult and discounting women's daily lives as valid literary material.

IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY

The novels, short stories, and plays of Svava Jakobsdóttir (1930–2004) are some of the most revolutionary works in contemporary Icelandic literature. With her first two volumes of short stories, *Tölf konur* (1965; Twelve women) and *Veizla undir grjótvegg* (1967; Party under a stone wall), she not only introduced the new women's liberation movement but also became the most influential exponent of modernism in Icelandic literary prose. Svava Jakobsdóttir describes women's experiences first and foremost as inner experience. She rejects objective realism, which, in her view, reflects

and promotes a traditional perception of the world. Instead, she looks beyond the dominant tradition to the narrative mode of fairy tales, with their mixture of fantasy and daily life. The women in her stories are usually middle-class housewives who, confined by their houses and domestic roles, suffer from a negative self-image. The stories reflect the women's search for identity as ordinary reality is transformed through grotesque and surreal metaphors of fantasy and horror. Houses, stone, concrete, walls, pictures, photographs, mirrors, clothes, postures, and masquerades occur frequently in the stories. Often they describe rites of passage, a wedding, a journey, or a move into a new house. In "Verkamaðurinn" (The laborer), in *Tólf konur*, the author describes the mental state of a housewife whose new awareness of her position leads her to experience her housework as a nightmare:

Dishes numbering in the thousands, cups, glasses, mugs, brooms, bowls, all came hopping, tumbled in, piled up, attacked her, commanding, powerful; and her boy's sweater with the hole in the elbow sat down in her arms, and she began darning and darning but she never got anywhere with the hole, and she had gotten old and the thread was all gone, and she began to pull gray hairs out of her head to darn with, and then her son was a grown man and had outgrown the sweater. Then she knew that it was things which had lived, but not she. (*Tólf konur*, 65)

Thus, the most ordinary objects are magnified and animated or the most shocking incidents related as if they were commonplace, often with a tragicomical effect. In "Saga handa börnum" (A story for children), which appeared in *Veizla undir grjótnegg*, the children cut out the brain of their self-sacrificing mother while she prepares a meal because they want to know what a brain looks like. They throw the brain in the trash can, but the mother continues with her work as if there has been no intrusion. The father comes home and scolds the children, not for maiming their mother, but, rather, for acting up at mealtime. Attacks and amputations figure prominently in the stories, often in connection with bodily metamorphoses. The title story of the collection *Gefið hvort öðru* (1979; English trans.: "Give unto Each Other," in Jakobsdóttir, *The Lodger and Other Stories*, trans. D'Arcy and Hill [2000]) describes a marriage ceremony at the altar as if it were a stage, with the bridal couple portrayed as the actors and the wedding guests the audience. The bride takes the minister's words literally, amputating her hand and giving it to the groom. The novel *Leiggjandinn* (1969; English trans.: *The Lodger*, in Jakobsdóttir, *The Lodger and Other Stories*, trans. D'Arcy and Hill [2000]) is about a woman who

searches for her identity in the safety and isolation of her house, with which she ultimately merges: “She closed her eyes and experienced nothing but the touch of the house. She stood like this until she could no longer distinguish between her skin and the stone, but felt her nerves and veins run directly into the walls of this house and felt her heart pumping her own blood to where the concrete defined her space in existence” (Jakobsdóttir, *The Lodger and Other Stories*, 110).

Svava Jakobsdóttir’s last collection of short stories, *Undir eldfjalli* (1989; Under a volcano), displays a shift from the grotesque to the more ecological, with an interest in wilderness and nature (Eysteinnsson, “At Home and Abroad”; see also p. 431). In the lyric novel *Gunnlaðar saga* (1986; The saga of Gunnlöð) she reworks the old myth of the giantess Gunnlöð, blending contemporary and ancient times, myth and reality, to create a utopia in which nature, woman, and poetry are linked together.

A PLACE TO BE

Houses and other kinds of dwellings are important symbols in women’s novels of recent decades. Jakobína Sigurðardóttir’s first novel, *Dægurvísa* (1965; A twelve-hour verse), employs several points of view to tell the story of the residents of a house in Reykjavík. Her futuristic novel *Snaran* (1968; The snare) takes place entirely within a factory and consists of a worker’s soliloquy to a silent interlocutor. *Í sama klefa* (1981; A shared cabin) describes the problematic connection of reality and text in the relationship of two women who end up in the same cabin on a ship. One is a writer from the city, and the other, a woman from the country, is her elusive subject. The parallel relationship between two women is also at the center of a novel by Vigdís Grímsdóttir (b. 1953), *Stúlkan í skóginum* (1992; The girl in the grove). One woman is physically and emotionally handicapped, trapped inside the house of the other, who is a dollmaker bordering on madness and in need of material for her art. Grímsdóttir’s novel *Ég heiti Ísbjörg, ég er ljón* (1989; My name is Ísbjörg, I am a Leo) tells the story of a girl in prison, a victim of sexual abuse and incest. The first novel of Gréta Sigfúsdóttir (1910–91), *Bak við byrgða glugga* (1966; Behind curtained windows), takes place in Norway during the war and portrays a woman who breaks society’s rules by having an affair with a German soldier. Expelled from society, she withdraws to the confines of her house, where she lives in seclusion.

The houses in these works are often located on the outskirts of town, as in the stories of Svava Jakobsdóttir, or along the shore, as in *Tímaþjófurinn* (1986; The thief of time) by Steinunn Sigurðardóttir (b. 1950) as well as

Eins og hafid (1986; Like the sea) by Fríða Sigurðardóttir (b. 1940). The latter's novel *Meðan nóttin líður* (1990; English trans.: *Night Watch* [1995]), which weaves together the lives of many generations of women, takes place in the mind of a woman who spends a night at the hospital sitting at the bedside of her dying mother. The story by Unnur Eiríksdóttir entitled "Hvítmánuður" (White month), in the short story collection of the same name, depicts the interaction of two women — an artist living in a tent at the edge of the hay field, the other woman inside the farmhouse. Líný Jóhannesdóttir's novel *Kerlingarslóðir*, mentioned earlier, describes the life of a middle-aged married woman with a full-time job who lives, significantly, in a half-finished house on the coast. Conversely, the central image in Líný Jóhannesdóttir's other novel, *Aumingja Jens* (1980; Poor Jens), is a group of old houses at the city limits that are being razed. Both of Líný Jóhannesdóttir's novels are filled with violence and oppression, especially against powerless people — women, children, the elderly and the isolated, the sick and the poor. These individuals are described as the counterparts of nature and animal life, subjugated by modern technological society.

Violence in some form is highly visible in contemporary fiction by Icelandic women. Fear of violence is a driving force in many of Fríða Sigurðardóttir's short stories in *Petta er ekkert alvarlegt* (1980; It's nothing serious) and *Við gluggann* (1984; At the window), stories that also deal with the difficulties of relationships, especially communication problems. Many of the novels and short stories of Álfrún Gunnlaugsdóttir (b. 1938) feature women fleeing from a threatening environment, and it becomes the central theme in Álfrún Gunnlaugsdóttir's first book of short stories, *Af manna völdum* (1982; By human design), many of the stories in which depict various rites of passage. For example, the first story in the volume concerns the pain of becoming an adult, initiated into the male society of violence. It takes place during the war and is narrated in fragments, reiterations, and flashbacks from a child's point of view — that of a little girl who lives in a summerhouse with her mother on the outskirts of Reykjavík. Into their harmonious female world a soldier intrudes, carrying a rifle, and they flee. The mother drags the girl on and through a barbed-wire fence in a metaphor of birth. On the other side of the fence the girl stands bloodied by the sharp wire, injured physically and emotionally. It is here that the story both begins and ends, forming a circle, a narrative device that characterizes other short stories by Álfrún Gunnlaugsdóttir as well as her two novels, *Þel* (1984; Sympathy) and *Hringsól* (1987; Circling).

One of the most original writers of the last decades of the twentieth century is Málfríður Einarsdóttir. Her fragmented memoirs and novels,

not published until she was in her late seventies, mix stream of consciousness, philosophy, lyricism, fantasy, grotesque imagery, and irony to create a strange and unreliable world. Among her six books are the novels *Auðmuleysingi og Tötrughypja* (1979; Luckless and the shaggy lady) and *Töttra í Glettingi* (1983; Töttra at Gletting), which are two of the most original novels about artists in Icelandic literature, as well as four autobiographical works, including the posthumous *Rásir dægranna* (1986; Tracks of time). The central metaphor in her work is the search for a place that she never finds, for it ultimately exists only in the vanished house of her childhood, a touchstone for all other houses that she encounters. Yet she “never needed to be nowhere” (*Samastaður*, 46), as she says in her first book, *Samastaður í tilverunni* (1977; A place to be), in one of her typically paradoxical statements. Málfríður Einarisdóttir frequently writes about language, and her work is full of allusions to Icelandic and world literature that she turns upside down and reinterprets.

A similar mixture of genres and inversions of language characterizes the poetry and fiction of Steinunn Sigurðardóttir, as seen in the playful titles of her two collections of short stories, *Sögur til næsta þegar* (1981; Tales worth telling) and *Skáldsögur* (1983; Fictions). The nonchalant tone with which Steinunn Sigurðardóttir juxtaposes lofty themes and ordinary phenomena like sexual relationships results in farcical but incisive statements about life. Her extremely ironical style, which is built on colloquial language, can become morbid in its overall effect. Like Málfríður Einarisdóttir, she reworks material from older texts, and some of her most noted themes and metaphors are based on intertextual relations. The novel *Tímaþjófurinn*, which verges on poetry, describes a woman’s desperate search for love and a place in society; at the same time the woman sees herself through the eyes of others and objectifies herself as a fictional character (Kress, “Dæmd til að hrekjast”). In the novel *Síðasta orðið* (1990; The last word) she parodies the obituaries of the daily press, which are a popular and uniquely Icelandic genre.

Steinunn Sigurðardóttir’s poems often deal with the act of composing poetry and the struggle of the woman poet against the male tradition. “Fyrir þína hönd” (On your behalf), in *Verksunnumerki* (1979; Traces), is a poem that speaks for a young woman in a fish factory who is trying to describe her life and, thus, gives a voice to the otherwise silent worker. As is so common in women’s poetry, it repudiates the traditional picture of happy family life: “At home, Mama is sickly and my daddy in a rage / Little Maja is cross-eyed and beaten like a fish.” Through the image of the poet and the factory worker the poem explores the problem of writing and

expressing oneself as the connection between poet and subject is made concrete:

There's nothing, nothing I can do. Hardly even cut fillets.

...

And me, I just want to sing. There's nothing quite like hearing me sing.
They tell me to shut my mouth.

...

I'm so stupid / that I can't even write this.

That's done by a woman in town. But what does she know?

(*Verksummerki*, 51–52)

In the poem “Skírlífi” (Chastity), in *Verksummerki*, Steinunn Sigurðardóttir personifies the various isms of literary tradition as rapists breaking in on the woman poet lying in her bed. To avoid violence she has no alternative but to let them in and submit.

“AND I THOUGHT I WAS A POET”

The real breakthrough in women's poetry occurred with Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir's (b. 1930) first two volumes of poetry, *Laufið á trjámum* (1965; The leaf on the trees) and *Dvergliljur* (1968; Crocuses), a breakthrough solidified in her *Kyndilmessa* (1971; Candlemas). *Ljóð*, a complete collection of her poetry, including poems from periodicals and her translations of poems, appeared in 1981, followed by *Klukkan í turninum* (1992; The bell in the tower). The innovations in her poetry spring from an overtly feminist point of view, consisting of colloquial language and images of daily life and familiar surroundings. These features, along with the blending of fantasy and ordinary reality as well as the use of unexpected points of view, characterize much of contemporary women's poetry.

A childlike perspective and metaphors of littleness are characteristic of many of Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir's poems, along with twists of convention whereby the little becomes big and the big little or inanimate objects — the traditional symbols for technology and alienation — are brought to life. In the poem “Á fjórðu hæð við umferðargötu” (Fourth floor on a busy street), in *Kyndilmessa*, automobiles cover in a parking lot like frightened animals, and the child viewing them from an upstairs window wants to go down and pet them. In Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir's many political poems against war and the U.S. military's presence in Iceland, the child is seen as analogous to poetry, and both are placed in contrast to the warfare of males.

Many of Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir's poems are concerned with women's

liberation and the position of women, topics examined by a voice that ranges from questioning to innocently puzzled to sarcastic and angry. The woman in “Óður til mánans” (Ode to the moon), in *Ljóð*, vows to go out on the balcony and shake her scrub brush in the moon’s face when she finishes her endless housework, for that is one place where “no woman has / been sent with / THE DISHRAG / not yet” (*Ljóð*, 124). The poet thus reworks the romantic imagery of literary convention by turning it around and linking it with daily life and the perspective of women. Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir frequently alludes to literary classics and reinterprets the major characters of world literature, such as Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler and Nora Helmer and Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina. The subject of the prose poem “Draumur” (Dream), in *Ljóð*, is the position of the woman poet vis-à-vis tradition, represented by Odin, the god of poetry in Old Norse mythology. She dreams that she is walking along a narrow trail, with the sea on one side and sheer cliffs on the other, where she meets a man with a hat pulled down over his face. She recognizes him as the god of poetry and calls out to him, for “I thought we had a lot to talk about.” But, when he looks at her, beneath the brim of his hat she sees the glint in his eye, burning with lust: “Then I realized that even Odin himself had only one thing in mind when it came to women. And I thought I was a poet” (*Ljóð*, 107). Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir experiences the woman poet’s oppression as physical violence — impending rape — as do Steinunn Sigurðardóttir in “Skírlífi” and Svava Jakobsdóttir in “Experience and Reality,” in which the woman risks going out on the street of literary tradition. In Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir’s poem what saves the protagonist is that she manages to shake off sleep and escapes by waking up, but “in my soul I burned with anger” (*Ljóð*, 107).

The child is a prevalent figure in all six volumes of poetry of Þuríður Guðmundsdóttir (b. 1939), the first of which, *Aðeins eitt blóm* (Only one flower), appeared in 1969. In the beginning the child is at one with the environment, full of hope and trust in life, with a strong connection to budding nature, spring, and play. In “Barn vorsins” (Child of spring), from *Og það var vor* (1980; And it was spring), the smallness of the child undergoes symbolic expansion in the image of a little girl skipping rope. In “Og það var vor,” from the same volume, life is personified as a girl who goes outside to play, tears her dress, picks flowers, and then brings them home that evening, wilted. Þuríður Guðmundsdóttir’s poems are short and lyric, revolving around a central image. The subjects of her poems are taken from nature, memories, and daily life, often capturing feelings of pain and sorrow, loneliness and abandonment. “Eitt lítið ástarljóð” (One little love poem), in *Það sagði mér haustið* (1985; The autumn told me so), is about

the difficulties of human relationships, especially communication, and the fear of being abandoned with so many words still to be uttered: “Sometimes / I’m afraid / that you’ll go away / and leave me all by myself / with all my unspoken words / that were meant for you” (*Það sagði mér haustið*, 72). Thus, many of Þuríður Guðmundsdóttir’s poems deal with the fear of being unable to express oneself, or, rather, the fear of being silenced.

The poems of Nína Björk Árnadóttir (1941–2000) deal with people who are outsiders in society, and the innocent surface of the language conceals violence, horror, and madness. Her first book of poems, *Ung ljóð* (1965; Young poems), was published the same year as Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir’s first book, and it was followed by six books of poetry and a novel, *Móðir, kona, meyja* (1987; Mother, woman, maiden). Nína Björk Árnadóttir also wrote plays, both for stage and for television. Her poems are often very dramatic—for example, monologues in which the speakers directly address an absent listener and try to describe themselves, struggling to achieve self-knowledge. The emphasis of the poems is usually identity and relationships, with the speakers seeking to understand themselves, both through language and in society, with frequent use of repetition, negations, unfinished sentences, and metaphors of concealment, escape, and silence. “Þú spurðir” (You asked), in *Undarlegt er að spyrja mennina* (1968; It’s strange to ask people), alludes to Icelandic folktales about the fairy in the rock, which becomes a metaphor for woman as outsider, excluded from society, and enclosed in silence and darkness:

You asked where I was to be found
I haven’t hidden myself,
but I live inside a blue rock
deep inside a dark blue rock
that turns black sometimes.
And without a doubt you would find
it strange in there. (*Undarlegt*, 71)

Nína Björk Árnadóttir’s poems are often tragicomic, as seen in “Doddi,” from *Svartur bestur í myrkrinu* (1982; Black horse in the dark), a poem that is not only a study of the connection between reality, perception, and words but also a highly original love poem: “I can’t believe I did that / did I really beat her / did I beat her / I can’t believe / I did that / I love her” (*Svartur bestur*, 45). Women with a poor self-image, offering their endless litanies of apologies and excuses, are central figures in Nína Björk Árnadóttir’s poems. In “Anna,” also in *Svartur bestur í myrkrinu*, a woman makes repeated efforts to find words to explain herself in relation to others but finally gives up, and

the poem dissolves in ellipses: “Please forgive me / that I should / that I have / for being / for being so / as / if / I / . . .” (*Svartur bestur*, 46). A similar disintegration of language occurs in a number of Nína Björk Árnadóttir’s short prose pieces, such as the short story “Og síðan hef ég verið hérna hjá ykkur” (And I’ve been here with you ever since), which blends dramatic, lyric, and fantastic modes to describe the struggle of a young secretary and single mother against an authoritarian male boss, resulting in the fragmented and stressed discourse of a woman who is going mad. The style is characterized by exclamations, unfinished sentences, and semiotic language that verges on being unintelligible. She expresses her frustrations by parodying the phone conversations of her boss — “Yes. Yes, yes, yes, yes. . . . Yes, we have blah blah blah blah blah” — or consoles herself by reciting the poems of her poet lover (*Draumur um veruleika*, ed. Kress, 179). The story ends when she makes her exit from society by stepping out of a tenth-floor window, and it is from this vantage point that she speaks.

The use of startling viewpoints is also apparent in the surrealist and often philosophical epigrams of Þóra Jónsdóttir (b. 1925), who by 1995 had published a total of seven books of poetry. Her search for identity and a place to be pervades her poems, as indicated by the title of her first book, *Leit að tjaldstæði* (1973; Search for a campsite). The poems frequently describe difficult journeys whose terminus is either an impassible road or the margins of a settled area. These journeys are undertaken sometimes on foot and at other times by such unpoetic means as the automobile, which is typical of Þóra Jónsdóttir’s distinctive figurative language. In “Stæði í miðborginni” (A parking place downtown), in *Leiðin heim* (1975; The way home), the search symbolizes a personal quest and, at the same time, the human condition: “It’s hard / to find a parking place downtown / some early birds / have parked their vehicles there / though one or two might open up / parking is hard / because vehicles / are never allowed to touch” (*Leiðin heim*, 12). In Þóra Jónsdóttir’s later poems the journeys tend to take place solely in the mind.

Unlike the majority of Iceland’s women poets, Ingibjörg Haraldsdóttir (b. 1941) lived abroad for many years, and in her first book of poetry, *Bangað vil ég fljúga* (1974; There I want to fly), Iceland is the place that inspires nostalgia. Her next book, *Orðspor daganna* (1983; Rumors of the days), deals with homecoming and disappointment. Ingibjörg Haraldsdóttir composes political poems opposing corruption and warfare as well as poems about the immediate surroundings of daily life, often mixed with a mourning for vanished ideals and lost childhood, when anything was possible. In many of her poems, especially those concerning women, their isola-

tion in their roles, and their search for identity, she counteracts daily reality with fantasy. The poem “Angist” (Agony), in *Orðspor daganna*, describes a woman’s split identity as a result of traditional housework. Agony gnaws slowly but persistently at her “root” deep in the soil until one day “it gnaws me in two / and a part of me rushes off, without restraint / into the blue / disappears out of the kitchen window / . . . / the other stays behind / and finishes the dishes” (*Orðspor*, 37).

The poems of the youngest generation of Icelandic women poets offer strong words of encouragement to their sisters to hold their own in the battle. This message is apparent in “Ef sverð þitt er of stutt” (If your sword is too short), a poem by Elísabet Þorgeirsdóttir (b. 1956) in her *Salt og rjómi* (1983; Salt and cream):

As if it’s nothing
 you zip through the dish washing
 . . .
 you scrub, wash, vacuum
 . . .
 Look straight ahead
 with feminine dignity
 . . .
 stand on both feet
 wherever you are
 be an even greater woman.
 (*Salt og rjómi*, 51)

Even more irony can be seen in the poem by Berglind Gunnarsdóttir (b. 1953) entitled “Súper súper . . .” in her first book of poetry, *Ljóð fyrir lífi* (1983; Poems for life): “Be brave / be strong / be realistic / . . . / no emotional giddiness / no groping / no shilly-shallying / . . . / leniency accomplishes nothing in the battle” (*Ljóð fyrir lífi*, 19). The title of her next book of poetry, *Ljóðsótt* (1986; Poetry pangs), contains a pun that likens the act of writing poetry to that of giving birth, with the poet in the role of the delivering mother. Þórdís Richardsdóttir (b. 1951) creates a similar image in the title of her first book of poetry, *Ljóð í lausaleik* (1976; Poems out of wedlock), and its opening poem, an image that is reminiscent of the epigraph to Júlíana Jónsdóttir’s book of poems precisely a century earlier: “My illegitimate poems / are footloose and fancy-free / unfathered / without support payments / neither adopted / nor in foster care / merely born.” The association between the birth of a child and the creation of a poem is developed in the poem’s various sections. In the end the mother/poet takes

the child in her arms and looks at it: "I see that you are a girl" (*Ljóð í lausaleik*, 7, 19).

"FOR ONE THOUSAND YEARS"

The most distinctive feature of literature by Icelandic women is its critical stance toward the literary tradition. Images are reversed or inverted, and ordinary women are turned into protagonists. But women bring to literature, not only new subject matter, but also new forms and a new style. The search for form is simultaneously a search for identity, a female identity that women can accept, and experiments with form seem to be most compelling among those writers who seek to portray the emotional life, thoughts, and experiences of women. It is striking that so many Icelandic women writers, both early and contemporary, have looked outside the dominant literary tradition for an expressive form that they viewed as capable of interpreting women's experience. Many avail themselves of the rich legacy of folk poetry, folktales, and fairy tales to shape their work, thus connecting with the female tradition that preceded them.

From early times to the present day one of the main characteristics of women's literature in Iceland is the use of fantasy. In modern works this element is often combined with the realism of everyday life and grotesque imagery, as best seen in the stories of Svava Jakobsdóttir. Here, the connections between female experience and literary form emerge clearly in the use of narrative point of view. A very prominent feature of women's fiction is an effort to describe the inner life of the female characters from their own perspective. Women see the world from the inside. This type of inside point of view appears first in Icelandic literature with Ólöf of Hlaðir, and it has been prevalent in women's prose up to the present day.

The first book of poetry by an Icelandic woman began with the word *little*. Metaphors of littleness characterize much of Icelandic women's literature, reflecting women's sense of being subjugated in their lives and culture by a larger social power. Women readily identify with that which is small and powerless. Flowers, birds, butterflies, little objects, and children are very common in the figurative language of Icelandic women writers. In one poem after another the women describe themselves as little. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the work of Ólöf of Hlaðir, who titled both her books of poetry *Some Little Verses*. In the poem "Lítill" she equates her physical stature with her stature as a writer: "A little might lifted me up / but little did I achieve. / Little I came and little I am, / little I'll take my leave." To Ólöf, her body is "small-limbed" and her mind "of little value."

She fully realizes the social causes of her smallness, for she compares society to a “wasteland” where nothing can grow, and at the end of the poem she speculates that she might grow taller in the afterlife, where “conditions will be a little bit better” (*Ritsafn*, 73).

In their search for identity, not only do women resort to the older female tradition, an inside point of view, and metaphors of littleness, but they also transform and reinterpret the conventions of the dominant tradition, presenting them in a different light. These iconoclasm of women’s literature, based on inversions and oppositions, are patently directed at exposing ideologies about the position of women and the relationship between the sexes. A good example of this kind of protest is Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir’s “Skassið á háskastund” (The shrew at the moment of danger), in *Kyndilmessa*. The poem inverts the famous passage in *Njáls saga* in which Hallgerður, one of the most notorious female characters in Icelandic literature, refuses to give Gunnar two locks of her hair for his bow, which would save his life:

Slaps to my cheek and bitter words
all is forgotten
oh, my dear
here is my braid
twist you a bowstring
I’ll whet the pantry knife
and fight as well
no house of mine will they
ever burn down
damn their hide.
(*Kyndilmessa*, 33)

Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir’s Hallgerður is a woman who hands her husband, not just locks of hair, but her entire braid, takes responsibility for defending her home, and fights with the womanly weapons that are available to her.

Many of the iconoclasm of women’s literature are aimed at tearing down the concept of masculinity, often in a highly grotesque way. This is how Málfríður Einarsdóttir begins the chapter “Umkomuleysi kvenfólks á Íslandi” (The vulnerability of women in Iceland) in *Samastaður í tilverunni*: “For one thousand years we Icelandic women have huddled shivering here in this disagreeable country without any school to go to and few things to enjoy unless it would be the men, and a plenty entertaining lot they mostly were, drunk as skunks, palsied, bloated from schnapps, black below the nose from tobacco, getting no pleasure out of anything at all” (*Samastaður*,

134). One might observe that this passage is the history of Iceland in a nutshell from the perspective of women. Men's heroic ideas of themselves are upended, along with their idealization of the country and its people.

All these qualities connect to women's search for identity at the same time as they violate the norms of a tradition that prevailed when women made their first appearance in print. In this way, Icelandic women writers have consistently turned to innovations that the literary tradition has then appropriated and integrated.

Translated by Alison Tartt

CHAPTER 8: SEARCHING FOR HERSELF: FEMALE EXPERIENCE AND
FEMALE TRADITION IN ICELANDIC LITERATURE

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