## POEMS FROM *THE OUTLIERS*

*Gunnar Benediktsson*

Ólafur: I was slow to read. Six years old, couldn't see in letters the body of a word. The teacher said I thought too hard, worried too much about the sentence, couldn't break it down to parts. "Relax," he said. My chin shuddered, the muscles of my jaw locked shut, cramps shot up into my temples. "Jesus," said the teacher. "Just relax," and tapped my fingers with his ruler. He rubbed his eyes with his palms. "Some people," he said. "Some people have trouble because the letters move in their eye."
I relaxed my arms and pressed my eyelids shut. I pressed green starbursts into my eyelids with my thumbs.
"Can you tell me what this letter is?" My teacher pointed at his paper with the broken tip of his pencil. His thumb was stained from rolling his own cigarettes.
"The body of a word," I said; he tapped my hand again, sent me home with a notebook full of capital As and Bs to memorize.

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Gísli: My father and probably even his father knew it was no good to have the lot here. Not at the bottom of a hill like that. The hill needs to be moved. Every spring water runs into the basement. I don't store anything anymore, it just gets ruined. Better if the house were alee. This house is windside, the roof needs fixing every summer. The water came in like the smell of a houseguest; it insinuated. The door-jamb warped, wetness got inside somehow, started a rot inside the wood until Ólafur leaned against the door and drove a long wet sliver deep into his thumb, right under the nail. We sat for three hours in the kitchen with a knife and pliers, but it wouldn't come out in one piece, yielded itself up mote by mote.

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Gísli: It's said that a long time ago there were eighteen schoolboys, graduates I guess, like Ólafur, came from Hólar into this part of the country. Some say they killed a woman, or they got in a fight with some rich farmer's son. They swore an oath to each other and escaped into the countryside, just out beyond that hill, in the caves about eight kilometers north of here. Those were outlaws. They stole sheep from all the farms, including the one that stood here, this very spot. My father never kept any sheep, I bought half of Gunnar's when I tuned thirty-four.
They kidnapped two women, took them into the countryside, from Kalmanstunga. Or some say they went along willingly, maybe a couple of the kids fell in love or something. No-one remembers which family they came from.

Ólafur: It was noticed that these women were gone when certain belongings of theirs went missing, things they could hardly do without: food, knives, blubber, socks and an oiled jacket. It's said that they had children out in the countryside, and gave them names, but that the schoolboys drowned them in the pool of water inside their cave.

Gísli: Gunnar says it wasn't sheep they robbed but pigs, but I never heard of anybody raising pigs around here. They lived in a cave on stolen livestock for two and a half years. Every Sunday they came to church, stood back to back in the centre aisle, watched the farmers with their eyes wide open, even while they prayed. Finally the farmers killed them, every last one, except for one who made it on a boat to Norway. Came back with only one leg, the son of a farmer killed him then. It's said that he lost it to gangrene, the rot set in on the boat when no man would touch him to dress his wound. Or that nobody would feed him, got so hungry he ate a piece of himself, that's how it is on boats sometimes. The sailors walked past his prone body like an invisible, unpleasant smell.

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Ólafur: My father tried to teach my fingers to hold a fishing rod with no talking. He knelt behind me, held my hands to the reel, pressed my fingers under his, swung the rod behind us, cast out the line. It was his strength. Alone, I could hardly get past the pier, the fishing rod slid from between my fingers, clattered to the wooden boards. I tried to reel the hook in faster, make the lure spin. He placed two fingers against my temple and cocked his thumb like a mechanical hammer. He clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, then turned away, walked a few steps down and sat with his legs hanging over the dock and kicked rhythmically against the wooden boards. He looked like a seven-year old on a piano bench. His legs were white and the skin around his ankle was circled with the crimped pink impression of a tube sock.

I reeled in the line, couldn't find where to put my hands, afraid the handle would spin away and keep spinning. I felt a tug on the line, looked up to see my father walking away. I tried to speak but my teeth wouldn't let go of my tongue, I felt a slow cramp ache in my jaw. He kept walking up to the car. I dropped the fishing rod, watched it skitter across the boards into the water.

Maybe it was the spot but we never caught anything except a few marhnútar. We stopped going because my father got tired of going back to the car for pliers to pry the hook out from between their massive jaws.

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Gísli: When my dog started to walk that way I should have known something was wrong. Dogs always know better than we do, my grandfather said it's because they operate chiefly by smell. If you walk through the hraun with your dog, follow step by step the exact same route and you won't trip, not unless you come to one of those wedged rocks your body cannot navigate. A dog's feet can find smaller purchase than a ridged, imperfect boot.

It wasn't long after the shooting that Ólafur came up with his gramophone looking for food and somewhere to sleep. I stood and watched him try to force a spoon between his clenched teeth. Later, I wrapped the remainder in cloth and put it into the small refrigerator. Don't know why we bother saving food. My son's dog won't eat human food the way mine used to.
I told Ólafur he couldn't have picked a worse time for a visit, Christ, can't a man be alone a little, just shot my dog anyhow. Used my own handkerchief to cover her eyes. I don't even have a gun, had to borrow one off Gunnar. Took the truck to see him. When I got there, couldn't find him, don't know if he was home but his gun was home.

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Ólafur: Softly hum with the shrill. Never wanted to usually drink wh, sod on a wooden frame. A mystery of dials, the ruler against my wrist. Can't use fountain pens, the letters too small, æ and δ. Build them straight the first time, or the wetness gets inside. Four to a hand, the flies not mine, no boat will take their load. Every furtive, crooked inch of vein, questions to the surface. Relentless, thirteen and arthritis or something legs tight together like a cannibal. The fierce rectangle of bed. The sound o my own thunder, breathing away to Keflavík. Body cannot navigate the shooting; alone with his shot dog. Don't know if he was home but his gun was home. I cannot go. Ridge of skin on the bottom of my foot falls like a tire-track, runs always in the same direction. Clumps of grass and dirt from the inside of his mouth, beautiful. Sagt er, can't even ride a horse; the faint tri-

angle where the saddle cut me. A list. Beautiful and clumps and dirt and mouth and beautiful. A twisting, but never touch it, not even to see the letters. An unwanted guest. Could not keep crooked with no voices. They patterned tongue, spoke but could not breathe in right places, pause between right words, smile at same time. Listen: Laconic bastard I know are legible to me between the I can read you have no enervate; I am fine on the surface of your body I could read your inadvisable economy; dialogue

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with alarm the hide moneys past metal says walk across mouth with foot marks mummified sprengisand-cast-leather-black-stain-ground-orient-steps curve gentle crooked in not out space and I hear knees drawn chest, reach on first floor electric with wire small rooms and eat only small discount chew slow like milking, like fish with and bones, like teeth together and yet but must open to admit slow and murderous victual

knows predator drives with meat but won't say scavenge; words bottom. speaks. a voids.