

voicing the silence

Her approach to short stories is also informed by this questioning of author and narrative. Rather than see herself as the omniscient originator of the narrative, Gunnars finds herself listening to "stories that have sort of floated by me. Partly what you've heard, but also your embellishments on what you've heard. All the stories in *The Axe's Edge* (her collection of short stories) have a historical base somewhere, there's something in there that actually happened. It's like finding the sculpture in the stone, rather than forcing it on the stone. I like to keep open to possibilities and allow the story to unfold in whatever way it might." Gunnars employs a similar narrative strategy in her story in *Unexpected Fictions*, "Insomnia", which is based on a few biographical details of an Icelandic-Canadian pioneer. She says that it would be erroneous to identify the story with an historical account of its protagonist's life: "Fiction is fiction, and it can't be historical. I play a lot of games with that border between fiction and real characters, whether the real character is me or someone else. People always come up against a brick wall when they try to make a historical reading of it. Something doesn't fit, and so that's where I have my laugh."

Like many other postmodernist writers, Gunnars does not make a division between

politics and writing. Her most explicit political statement, the poem "The Night Workers of Ragnarok," deals with the presence of nuclear weapons on the NATO base at Keflavik, Iceland, a fact that the American military denied but which was later confirmed to be true. This fact points to what Gunnars sees as the ongoing colonial domination of Iceland, first by the Danes from the 15th century to World War II, then by the British and the Americans. This is one of the many thematic threads in *The Prowler*. "Everything in [*The*

they can't reach their full cultural potential, and this is what's been happening to Iceland all the time."

In addition to her prose works, Kristjana Gunnars is also an active poet. When questioned about the average Canadian's indifference to poetry, she says, "Well, that's just Canada. Poetry is very fundamental to most cultures I know. It's not as fundamental in English-speaking Canada for some reason, but I can't help that. There's something in the human psyche of soul that needs poetry."

My task in life is the translation, the expansion, and the preservation of Icelandic culture.

Prowler] boils down to politics," she says. "I do have an overriding sense of politics about anything, not party politics, nothing quite so gross, but just that the way things are is a direct result of what people have done. What concerns me is people manipulating other people, in whatever form that takes. Like feminists are concerned with men manipulating women so that they cannot reach their full potential, well, this happens on a national level as well. Other nations manipulate smaller, weaker nations, so that

Even though Canada is absolutely bursting with fantastic poets, high quality poetry, it doesn't seem to be very appreciated. One can only hope that people will eventually come around to appreciating their own substance."

Part of the blame for this indifference, Gunnars says, lies in "the schools, the education system for not introducing, at a younger age, local writing. [Students] are given [poetry] from some other time, some other place, and, consequently, some other language. Even if it is English, it's another language. I don't condone this behaviour at all. I think that young people should read poetry that appears where they live, that uses images from their immediate surroundings, something they recognize."

Gunnars' job as writer-in-residence is a job that is not understood very well by the general public. Her immediate task, she says, "is to spend a couple of afternoons a week discussing people's manuscripts with them. I act as a consultant." In addition to this role, "I am expected to work on my own writing. Partly it's a job that facilitates my writing something specific. Writer-in-residence positions are more valuable than they are sometimes thought to be, because this exchange goes both ways." Through the people with whom she works, "I find out a lot about what's going down here. It gets brought into my literature, it gets brought into what I write." The project which she is currently working on is a new collection of short stories, which she hopes to have finished by Christmas.

Kristjana Gunnars' voice is being heard. *The Prowler* is certain to be a lasting example of a kind of writing which takes itself as a subject, yet manages to avoid the pitfalls of solipsism and self-indulgence, which is often the fate of less talented writers. Her work in promoting Icelandic culture should also be effective by bringing the poetry of Stephan Stephansson the attention which it deserves, and by bringing attention to a diverse group of talented writers in "Unexpected Fictions." Within the context of university life, it is to be hoped that Kristjana Gunnars will be heard by a younger generation still finding their voice, so that they can continue to voice the silence.

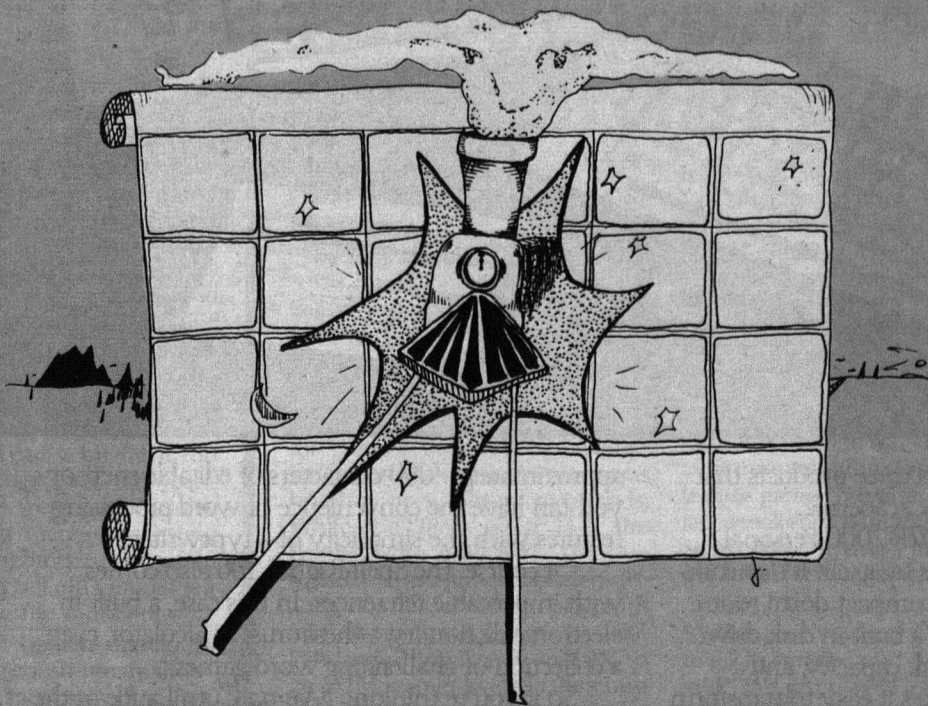
I do not understand time
the sudden passing and abrupt jumps
from one time to another
large gaps lost, outside memory

I do not know where our life has gone
whether we have gone through it
bravely or not mistakenly or not
and there is much I do not remember

large days without you
when you have receded out of focus
perhaps in the whistle of the train
burrowing by at night

waking me from sleep
the speeding alarm on its rails
that says there is something we forgot
and the walls are shaking

—from *Carnival of Longing*
by Kristjana Gunnars



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