

## Translator's preface - Nothing to be Rescued

I'm sitting at a plastic laminate table behind a glass divider, the only spot in the room with a jeweler's magnifier lamp. My back is to the archivist's desk, her guarded stacks concealed behind immaculate glass, which I imagine as shatterproof. *Leave no marks here*, I think.

A woman emerges carrying three crisp white boxes. I feel like a passenger riding backward on a train.

The first box holds illustrations, 8x10, with rounded edges: playing cards, hand-drawn, hand-painted in so many colors. Some suits are left unfinished—outlines of gray, incipient bodies. This is Ásta's famous folklore deck, which she did not complete.

The next contains ephemera, her personal belongings: a brochure for the church in Skálholt and its bishop's tomb, an artist book from City Lights in San Francisco (BOMB, Gregory Corso, 1958), an empty envelope addressed to the bond department of a defunct bank. A personal ad, written in rhyming verse, clipped out of the paper and latched into the gutter of a notebook (a good girl, orderly, reply c/o). A love letter to her children, written and rewritten, different attempts. Several poems or fictions—the genre isn't clear, but the intensity of her need is. They're feral scrawlings, ciphers rendered in a stupor. And this typewritten note (roughly translated):

*...be like a seed that grows from the dark soil toward the sun and the day and becomes a gigantic tree that spreads its branches wide. [...] May fortune follow you. Burn this letter. My thoughts are best kept in flames.....*

Twenty minutes before the archive closes, I reach the final box – and find a folder of drafts and unpublished stories (which she may have been gathering for a collection), handwritten neatly in a flowing script. “Death of the Drunkard” – its first line knocks the wind out of me. I translate it, very roughly. It's nailed to the page, a signpost at the turnoff to an impassable road:

*When a drunk dies, they are alone because no relatives or friends are present. They have all forgotten them long ago.*

Tidily written, so tidily written.

I photograph each page, hurried but gentle, capturing this vessel for confession, this destructive force foretold.

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One of the most famous photographs of the woman who left these boxes behind—a photograph that perhaps more than anything transformed her into an idol—was published alongside her story “Street in the Rain”. She is naked from the chest up. She's wearing cat-eye liner, eyebrows sharp, carved; her lips are dark and full. She's holding a burning cigarette. She

wears a metal choker as a beavor. Her hand casts a shadow over her sternum—her gaze is turned away.

A companion image, one of several, was displayed in the window of the artist's – Jón Kaldal's – studio at Laugavegur 11. Her face is turned toward me, but her eyes don't make contact; she's looking beyond me. Her left nipple is visible (though traditionally, and even now, it's cropped out). Thrice, this window was replaced because of vandalism, furious attempts to deface her brazen beauty.

This striking woman was shaped by the elements of her childhood: fragrant heath, mire, lava field, and shore. Ásta Jóna Sigurðardóttir was born on April 1, 1930 at a farmstead called Litla-Hraun to a reluctant farmer and self-taught scholar named Sigurður Benjamín Constantinus Jónsson and his god-fearing wife, Þórunn Guðmundsdóttir, who was a staunch Adventist and hard worker. In her early years, Ásta did not have access to schooling. The farm was not equipped with running water or electricity; neither did the family have a radio. Books and stories were the entertainments of the household, and Ásta's father's fascination with literature stoked her natural creativity and brilliance. A gifted artist and writer, steeped in the riches of myth and folklore, poetry and wild country.

At 14, she moved to Reykjavík to begin a formal education—an uncommon path for a rural girl in midcentury Iceland. She began to dress in fashionable clothes that lent her an air of glamour: the movie star in a modest milieu. Soon, she'd dye her chestnut brown hair black, paint herself in the makeup of Hollywood heroines (among friends, she later earned the nickname 'Cleopatra with 11 fingers'), and sew her own garments. She would sometimes go around in a pelt. This was also when she began to drink.

At the time, Reykjavík was a fledgling city with a population of around 38,000, which had recently borne the physical and cultural shocks of industrialization and two Allied militaries who brought their cultural norms and idols to the island. The emergence of the middle class in twentieth century Iceland enabled a pronounced demarcation between home and work, and in turn, a sharp division of gender roles – a notion of “separate spheres” previously impractical in a more seasonal, agriculture and fishing-based economy. These changes to the social fabric fueled stigmas around sex and childbearing outside of marriage in a country that, previously, was fairly tolerant of nonmarital children.

In the 1940s, women and girls' lives were policed because of a manic suspicion of their relationships with Allied soldiers. Fraternalization was seen by some as wanton and treasonous, and was often negatively equated with sex work. A committee formed to, ostensibly, assess the scope of the “problem” and to remediate it. In the most extreme cases, women suspected of sleeping with soldiers – their names compiled on running lists – were forced to undergo pelvic examinations. All women and girls could be subject to surveillance, interrogation. (In 2015-2016, Parliament conducted an official inquiry into this period, with particular attention to a facility called Kleppjárnshótel).

Ásta examines this period—called “The Situation” or “Ástandið”—in her story “Lillies” through the figure of a sick, nameless young woman who twice becomes pregnant outside of marriage, first to an American soldier and later to a “good” Icelander. She lives in a Nissen barracks hut (in Icelandic: “braggi”), purchased en masse from the military by the Icelandic government for temporary, low-cost housing. She attempts to measure up to rich and fine women, even as her callous doctor insists that “people should take better care of themselves. Those old barracks aren't any place for a child.” No action she takes will wash away the sin of poverty, of becoming

pregnant while poor. The author herself at times lived in a Nissen hut, and – as attested to in her letters – experienced houselessness and hunger.

After receiving her secondary school diploma, she matriculated to Teacher's College. In her second year, Ásta became pregnant; it was decided that her mother would keep the child while Ásta finished her studies, but Þóranna ultimately raised this child. I find myself wondering if this loss event was, in a distant way, the inspiration for “In Which Pram”—in which a woman obsessively searches for her nonmartial infant, who was taken from her at birth, furtively peering into prams while their owners are out of sight. Ásta describes these carriages in saturated detail—wealthier couples have beautiful prams, and their children have new toys and smell of powder, while poor and single mothers use baskets, roller skates, and umbrella skeletons as construction materials; they smell of sour milk. Each shoos away the protagonist, an outsider, as they would a pest.

Later, she became pregnant with the child of another artist, who coerced her into undergoing an abortion, which was only legal under the narrowest of circumstances (her pregnancy did not fit them). This may have been the foundation for one of her early stories, “The Dream”, a nightmarish narrative in which reality and dream smear across another during a young woman's unsafe abortion; after, when she is bleeding, disoriented, and stumbling, the fine people of Reykjavik jeer at the blood “puddled on the back of [her] dress.”

“Harlot!” One calls, “Don’t you want to change your clothes?””

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Ásta’s lifestyle and worldview exiled her from mainstream society. Work was scarce, and Ásta's housing situation was unstable. Though she struggled with poverty and houselessness, she pursued mentorships and became part of a cohort of like-minded artists — bohemians such as the Atom Poets — who shared her values and embraced an exploration of inner life through dreamlike narratives. They frequented cafés — Hressingarskálin, Kommakaffi, Laugavegur 11 (“Ellefu”)— that were safe spaces for queer self-expression. As Bragi Kristjánsson colorfully illuminates in his 1992 article, Ellefu’s regulars were “artists, scholars, students, and other successful and unsuccessful intellectuals, aficionados of arts and education, small-time thieves and eccentrics, editors and journalists, and half-unhinged folk.”

For a time, Ásta supported herself by modeling nude, which, combined with her image and the company she kept, caused a stir. She was known to take her breaks stark naked, reminding shocked passersby that she was ‘in her work uniform’. Audacious, big, alive. Because of her appearance and mystique, she has been mythologized as the bohemian ideal. However, this obscures the depressing reality. Like the linocuts Ásta created to illustrate many of her stories, she is a remnant, the pattern left when shadow is cut from light. A process of constitution through subtraction.

Ásta's breakthrough came shortly after she received her teaching degree, with the story “Sunday Night to Monday Morning”, the seminal work that would become the title of her 1961 collection, in the periodical *Líf og list*; at the time, literary circles praised its ingenuity and bravery, but the mainstream saw it as scandalous, shameful. “Sunday Night to Monday Morning” relates a surreal account—Ásta's—of a young woman who is assaulted while vulnerable and intoxicated. In its strange poetry, it makes tangible the sense of disembodiment one might experience during

a traumatic event. As in her other stories, her naïve protagonist's worldview pendulates between an anchored belief that "people are good," and instinctual horror and fear at the deliberate harm they do.

Fittingly, the story is now lauded as a brave Me Too story—one in which I have found a tarnished mirror. With sirenic insistence, this story called. My answer is this translation.

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Even as she blossomed in an artistic society, Ásta's alcohol dependence continued to worsen. She discarded a 300-page novel. During her partnership with the poet Þórsteinn frá Hamri, the pair had five children. They were born in quick succession, with only six years between the youngest and the oldest. Her accelerating cycles of benders lessened her ability to care for herself and her children, and her partner soon left. After this, her children were repeatedly removed from her care. The trauma of losing them replayed on an endless loop, a circuit of shocks soldered by a disease of despair.

Ásta appears to have sought treatment several times, but toward the end of her life, the depth of her addiction had become so profound that she was willing to drink whatever was at hand, including antifreeze, to feel drunk. On December 21, 1971, at the age of 41, she died of complications of alcohol abuse.

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In one of her final letters to her children in March of 1971, she speaks of her unwavering belief in the wonder of language and literature. She writes: "...try to learn all of the best *kvæði* by heart [...] and to understand the language, to sense how Icelandic glitters like frost on a still, white day."

Ásta's work continues to thrive because of the familiarity of these stories, their symmetry with other women's experiences of shame, neglect, harm—and of power, resilience, care. They are the stories of those whose stories go untold. She approaches these subjects with, in the poet Sjón's words, "restrained anger and compassion for those [she] had broken bread with on her own turbulent journey<sup>iii</sup>".

And they are flashes of clarity. In them are moments where I can see Ásta's mind playing out and processing trauma from a safe distance, critiquing a society that banished those who didn't follow its templated paths – that laughed at a bleeding woman.

I selected this title of this slim volume, *Nothing to be Rescued*, rather than the name of Ásta's best-known story and the title of her 1961 collection, because of the phrase's interpretive possibilities. It is, to me, the meeting point of self-assertion and self-erasure: where love and fear collide.

These stories, ten of many, hold powerful warnings. In Ásta's frissonic prose, they are living wonders, too.